Empowering people, facilitating community development, and contributing to sustainable development: the social work of sport, exercise, and physical education programs

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Do sport, exercise, and physical education (SEPE) professionals empower the people they serve and contribute to community development? Do SEPE policies, programs, and practices contribute to sustainable economic and social development, making them worthwhile governmental investments? These questions frame the ensuing analysis. Empowerment-oriented and community-based SEPE programs, and practices may contribute to sustainable development in five related areas. They may enhance human health and well-being across the lifespan; mollify the harms caused by poverty, social exclusion, social isolation, and inter-group conflict; contribute to human capital development, especially in vulnerable youth; develop collective identities, thereby facilitating collective action; and foster social networks and voluntary associations, which animate civil society in strong democracies. To achieve these potential contributions, SEPE professionals will need to develop new capacities and build new institutions. These pervasive changes characterize the social work of SEPE programs, practices, and policies

Prologue

Should the governments of the so-called ‘developing nations’ invest in sport, exercise, and physical education (SEPE) programs? This question is especially salient today. Faced with new economic constraints (e.g. structural adjustment policies, inflation, currency de-valuation), governmental leaders must make difficult choices involving competing priorities. Here, SEPE professionals, programs, practices and policies are pitted against their counterparts in other sectors, including social welfare, health, criminal justice, public works, environmental protection, and economic development. To compete successfully, SEPE leaders and their supporters

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must be able to make the case that they and their programs and policies are worthwhile investments. More concretely, these leaders, advocates, and supporters must be able to identify and substantiate causal connections between investments in SEPE operations and key measurable outcomes. These measurable outcomes also must indicate progress toward sustainable and integrated economic and social development.

Arguably, SEPE leaders around the world are hard pressed to respond to the attendant demands because knowledge and understanding are in short supply. Special conferences and invited papers provide effective ways to get started because they raise important questions for theory, research, practice, and policy development.

Toward this end, SEPE leaders representing the government of Indonesia sponsored in September 2003 an international conference focused on sport, peace, and sustainable development. They sought to gain and integrate knowledge, enabling them to make the case that governmental investments in SEPE professional, programs, and policies are worthwhile and justifiable. And so they invited SEPE colleagues from diverse parts of the world to prepare papers focused on important aspects of sustainable development. In particular, Indonesian leaders wanted to substantiate two claims. SEPE professionals, policies, programs, and practices facilitate both empowerment and community development. In turn, empowerment- and community development-oriented SEPE professionals and their operations contribute to sustainable development. Such is the rationale and focus for the ensuing analysis.

Introduction

Empowerment and community development, individually and in combination, have been mainstays in social welfare policies and economic development policies in diverse governments around the world. Recently, both concepts have become priorities in health policies, mental health policies, environmental protection policies, anti-terrorism policies, and criminal justice policies. This growing popularity suggests that something important is going on. Clearly, SEPE professionals and policy makers should take due notice. They need to determine whether they should be concerned with empowerment and community development; and, if so how they may harness these two concepts to improve their practices, programs, and policies.

These determinations require grand conceptual frameworks, which satisfy several evaluative criteria. For example, these frameworks must be grounded in salient theory and research. They must be adaptable enough to accommodate social geographic uniqueness, historical and cultural diversity, and other key contingencies. At the same time, they must yield ‘actionable’ knowledge (e.g. Argyris, 1996). i.e. knowledge about what to do to gain desired results, including how to do it, when, where, and why. This actionable knowledge also must indicate possible errors as well
as error detection and correction mechanisms. These criteria were instrumental in the development of the following analysis.

The analytical progression and the main argument

This analysis begins with five main contributions SEPE operations may make to sustainable, integrated social and economic development. Then relevant choices are identified. After empowerment, community development and their relations are identified and described briefly, social work's potential contributions to and relationships with SEPE professionals and operations are sketched. Emergent challenges associated with globalization close out this analysis. Multiple, pervasive changes are identified throughout, indicating that institution building is a practical necessity.

The main argument is as follows. Empowerment-oriented, community development is a valuable resource to SEPE professionals because it improves practices, programs, and policies. Reciprocally, strategically designed SEPE practices, programs, and policies offer improvements to community development initiatives. These dual improvements hinge on SEPE professionals’ willingness and capacity to develop program alternatives to elite sport; become engaged in anti-poverty initiatives; and assume roles as community builders. This preparation for community building includes collaboration with other professionals—especially social workers—who are versed in empowerment and community development and are committed to combating poverty and its correlates. As SEPE professions develop this capacity to serve as community builders, entirely new possibilities will open to them. These possibilities include opportunities to contribute to sustainable, integrated social and economic development. When SEPE programs benefit development, they are worthwhile investments for governments.

Examples are provided throughout the analysis, as space and understanding permit. These examples derive from nations of the Global North. Although these nations are fundamentally different from ones in the Global South, it is possible to find identical and similar problems and needs. In fact, some Northern localities are worse off! For example, in some urban localities in the United States, the infant mortality rates are higher than they are in Southern localities such as Bangladesh (Sen, 1999). These Northern localities are plagued by a powerful, terrible combination of concentrated poverty, social exclusion, social isolation, and inter-group conflict and hostility. In these localities, personal and social problems such as substance abuse, preventable disease, and crime co-occur.

In response to these problems, leaders often rely on empowerment strategies and empowerment-oriented community development models. In other words, empowerment and community development usually are ‘code words’ for poverty, its companion ills, the human suffering they inflict, and the actions undertaken to address them.
Selectivity and Limitations

Obviously, planning for sustainable, integrated social and economic development entails more than anti-poverty strategies. This analysis is selective because it focuses on poverty, its correlates, and attendant harms.

The lack of a substantial body of research and theory comprises a formidable, unavoidable problem. This problem is evident throughout this analysis, and so are the limitations associated with it. It necessitates three compensatory strategies. The first strategy is to make high-risk inferences from the available theory and research. The second is to draw on normative theories, i.e. value-committed, utopian theories about SEPE programs, policies, and practices in good, just, sustainable societies in a peaceful world. The third is to make claims based on personal observations and experiences. All three strategies double as inherent limitations. If this paper effectively stimulates international dialogue, identifies untapped potential, encourages new lines of research and theory building, and fosters international collaboration, then these limitations may be easier to tolerate.

Five contributions to development

SEPE professionals, practices, programs, and policies have the potential to strengthen both empowerment and community development initiatives, especially those in high poverty localities plagued by social exclusion, social isolation, and inter-group hostility. To the extent that SEPE professionals do this good work in localities, they will contribute to national and international agendas for sustainable, integrated social and economic development.

More specifically, SEPE professionals may design and deliver practices, programs, and policies that make five main contributions to sustainable and integrated social and economic development.

- They may produce and reinforce *social networks* involving participants, their family systems, other residents, and other helping professions. Vibrant social networks produce rich stocks of social trust, norms of reciprocity, and conditions conducive to cooperation, coordination, and collaboration. These social networks animate democracy and sustain its civil society. All of these ‘products’ are vital to sustainable development (e.g. Putnam, 1993; Briar-Lawson *et al.*, 2001).

- They may contribute to the development of *collective identities*. Place-based, local identities are especially important because they may bridge inter-group differences and conflicts, facilitate social integration and solidarity, and enable collective action. Here SEPE programs may be designed strategically to facilitate appropriate, continuous, and face-to-face interactions, enabling strangers and outsiders to become friends and insiders. For example, during the 1970s and 1980s Canada invested in sport (and the arts) as key instruments for a pan-Canadian movement.

- They may improve *human health*, and at the same time, they may create *health-enhancing environments*. Healthy people and health-enhancing environments are
vital to development initiatives. Health problems and disease-producing environments hamper development initiatives, perhaps dooming them to fail.

- They may improve well-being. Well-being includes health, but it also transcends it. Other well-being indicators include: (1) loving, caring, and nurturing relationships, especially those provided children by strong families; (2) environments conducive to optimal human development across the life course; (3) opportunities and supports for identity development, meaningful engagement, efficacy and self-worth; (4) social support networks provided by vibrant neighborhood communities; (5) peaceful harmonious relations among diverse people; (7) greater equality (and minimal inequality); and (8) reducing and, ideally, eliminating poverty, social exclusion, and social isolation. Clearly, SEPE practices, programs, and policies alone will not yield all of these well being outcomes. SEPE professionals must collaborate with others, and, as they do, they will strengthen and improve sustainable development initiatives.

- They may contribute to human capital development. Human capital is an economic concept employed to describe workforce characteristics deemed essential to sustainable, integrated social and economic development. It includes health and well being, but its main focus is on the knowledge, skills, attitudes, competence, and characteristics of individuals and groups, especially their capacities for productive citizenship and work-related activities. Education and schooling are thus vital mechanisms for human capital development. Youth development is another such mechanism. Insofar as SEPE professionals, programs, practices, and policies are instrumental in improving youth development and enabling educational success, they contribute to human capital development and, in turn, sustainable development. These contributions are especially salient when vulnerable, alienated youth comprise one of the main populations being served by SEPE professionals.

Thus, SEPE professionals, practices, programs, and policies have immense potential to contribute to sustainable, integrated, social and economic development. Unfortunately, this huge potential is not being realized in many parts of the world. One reason is obvious: SEPE programs have not been designed to contribute to development. Other reasons will become apparent as critical choices are identified and surveyed.

**Sport and movement culture or a broader framework?**

All planning depends fundamentally on a planning vocabulary. This shared vocabulary facilitates communication and effective action. More than a collection of words, planning vocabularies reflect and promote vested interests, political and economic factors, particular kinds of knowledge, and power relations and authority structures. For this reason, critical theorists recommend the concept of a discourse. A discourse may be defined simply as the recurrent use of a language system, which reflects and promotes particular interests, authority, and power (e.g. Lawson, 1993).
Life in every human service profession includes competitions among alternative discourses. One tends to become dominant, while others are residual and emergent (e.g., Lawson, 1988).

All SEPE professionals acquire and use discourses during their training programs and in their jobs. In other words, planning, practising, researching, and theorizing depend fundamentally on discourses. Furthermore, discourses are crucial to any understanding of institutional maintenance and change. For example, if you want to change institutionalized practices, policies, programs, and people, activities, then you need to change the dominant discourse, i.e., the preferred language system.

In brief, all planning vocabularies, or planning discourses, are ‘loaded with ideological baggage’, and they are inherently selective. For, when planners choose a discourse, they also determine how they will talk, what they will talk about and do and who will talk, including whose voices are not heard. This is why some planners recommend the strategic use of alternative discourses, including their respective cognitive, ethical/moral, and affective frames. These alternatives help guard against every discourse’s selectivity and attendant risks.

Aiming to promote an alternative discourse, this paper introduces a new acronym: SEPE. As this new discourse is developed, an important choice becomes apparent. What and whose discourse will be used? Who will decide? Who decides, who decides?

These questions are important because, arguably, there is a dominant discourse in the SEPE international community. It provides an efficient and convenient way to communicate and act. International colleagues, especially those in Europe, use ‘sport’ as the centerpiece in this discourse. For these colleagues, sport is an all-encompassing concept, and so is sport-related discourse. It includes a variety of activities and programs comprising what Crum (1998) and others call ‘the movement culture’. In fact, Crum has developed an elaborate classification of sport activities, including the attendant implications for physical education programs. This is admirable work. And apparently, this sport-oriented, dominant discourse works in the several national contexts in which it is employed.

Even so, a new and rapidly developing alternative merits consideration and use. This alternative is especially relevant to empowerment and community development models, and professionals from other fields are promoting it.

In this new planning framework and its accompanying discourse, sport and movement culture are still important. But instead of being the whole, i.e. the entirety of the framework and its vocabulary, sport and movement culture are part of something bigger and more inclusive. This bigger, more inclusive framework and its working vocabulary are focused on human health and well-being across the lifespan.

This lifespan health and well-being framework and accompanying discourse includes all of the cultural practices and influences associated with the human body. They include an infinite variety of exercise and sport activities, but they do not stop with them. They also include relations with nutritional practices, disease prevention practices, and environmental health practices. They therefore depend on
strong working relationships and shared discourses with physicians, nurses, dieticians, public health professionals, recreation professionals, and social workers. (These relationships are described in greater detail later in this analysis.)

This emergent framework is not restricted to health promotion and disease prevention. In other words, its aim is not to advocate for a strict medical model or a public health model. More than personal health, it includes policies, programs, and activities that directly enhance well-being.

*Exploring well-being*

Well-being was sketched earlier. To reiterate, well-being is a comprehensive concept, and development initiatives depend on it. It includes provisions for optimal human development, starting with strong, positive identities, both individual and collective. Well-being also includes strong families, supportive communities, peaceful, harmonious relations among diverse people, and greater economic, political, and social-cultural equality (e.g. Briar-Lawson, *et al.*, 2001, pp. 45–40.) Equality and its close relation, equity, are important because they are conducive to social solidarity and integration, and they are indicative of a societal commitment to social and economic justice. In fact, some research indicates that nations with extreme inequality (e.g. the United States) tend to be ‘unhealthy societies’ (e.g. Wilkinson, 1996). Unhealthy societies are hosts to preventable diseases and social problems that impair and shorten lives. Pervasive poverty, a key indicator of inequality, is an example of such a problem.

Well-being is both an outcome and a mechanism for sustainable, integrated social and economic development. In other words, successful development results in improved well-being, and high levels of well-being foster development. Like development, well-being depends on a special blend of economic, social, political, and psychological factors.

This emphasis on health and well-being, in a life course developmental framework, broadens the scope of SEPE policies, programs, and practices. Although conventional sport contributes to well-being, mass exercise and forms of play make the biggest contribution. For example, in vibrant, healthy communities, convivial play forms are the threads that knit together the everyday social fabric of local communities. Play forms involving the body include dance, yoga, biking and backpacking, social walking, bicycling, drama, music, art, and the games of children and adults. When diverse people are connected through play, they produce strong, social networks. Play produces, and reproduces, collective identities and community narratives, enabling people to enjoy social solidarity, join together for collective action, and foster peaceful, harmonious relations. In the process, sustainable development is facilitated.
Flaws, limitations, and selectivity in the current SEPE system

There are other reasons for considering this framework for human health and well-being across the lifespan. Examples follow, beginning with the limitations of the current SEPE system.

The dominance of global pro-olympic sport

Arguably, the current system of sport and physical education is too selective and limited. As a result, in many parts of the world, SEPE professionals have failed to deliver on their promises to serve ‘the masses’. Although professionals could rely on important planning frameworks such as Crum’s (1998), in reality the current system’s emphasis on sport and movement culture often is narrow. Technical-procedural knowledge and discourses for sport and movement culture dominate because in many parts of the world, SEPE, professionals, governmental leaders, and representatives from private enterprise focus exclusively on elite sport.

This elite sport emphasis in nations around the world is associated with the process of globalization. In fact, a new model for global, elite sport has developed (Maguire, 1999). This model is a hybrid. It combines professional sport and olympic sport, and accordingly, it may be called “pro-olympic sport” (Ingham & Lawson, 1999). Pro-olympic sport is commercialized. It is produced so that spectators may consume it, and increasingly athletes are sport’s employees.

Pro-olympic sport certainly offers selective benefits. The question is, who benefits, and for how long? Smith and Ingham (2003) raise these and other important questions about the collective, lasting benefits of this sport to community building in the United States. They suggest that sport’s contributions to community-building are short-term and limited to persons with the discretionary incomes now required of spectators.

Furthermore, pro-olympic sport is flawed because it is associated with violence involving athletes, coaches, referees, and spectators. Its ‘win at all costs’ framework encourages ethical violations and moral problems. It also limits participation through limited opportunity structures and its demands on athletes. Figure 1 depicts aspects of this system and its career trajectories (adapted from Ingham & Lawson, 1999). Clearly, athletes are separated from non-athletes. Indeed, non-athletes are ‘weeded out’ at two exit points in this system. If they continue to remain involved, they do so in secondary roles (e.g. coach, referee) and tertiary roles (e.g. spectator or ‘fan’).

In many nations, this pro-olympic system accounts for the selectivity, limitations, and, indeed, the failure of SEPE programs to reach ‘the masses’. To begin with, selectivity, exclusion, and the accompanying prestige and special identities are inherent in the meaning of ‘elite’.

Furthermore, former athletes tend to conduct those programs. Their love for their work is tied to their love for elite sport. For many such SEPE professionals, developing and coaching athletes is the anchor for their careers (e.g. Lawson, 1988).
In other words, these professionals’ identities, commitments, and orientations are inseparable from pro-olympic sport’s institutionalized apparatus, which was instrumental in their professional socialization. Many thus lack commitments and abilities for teaching and counseling everyday people, enabling them to play without ‘win–lose’ dynamics and to exercise enough to secure health and well-being outcomes. Many fail to understand that, for many people, the goal is to exercise as little as possible i.e. just enough to achieve health and wellbeing benefits. This minimalist orientation is especially salient to adults and children who perform manual labor and to persons harmed by poverty who often struggle to get enough to eat.

In opposition to this minimalist orientation. SEPE professionals often superimpose elite values and goals. For example, ‘Whatever your performance standard is today, it’s not good enough: you must do more tomorrow’ No wonder elite sport and its operations often fail with everyday people.

Here is the crux of the matter. Everyone wants to be healthy and enjoy well-being, but not everyone wants to compete, struggle, sacrifice, enjoy the sweet tastes of victory, and endure the agony of defeat. Elite, sport-oriented systems fail to accommodate these realities, and this limitation signals other reasons why it is timely to search for alternatives and build new institutions.

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**Figure 1.** The pro-olympic prototype for elite sport identities, careers and opportunity structures.
Health care costs and the takeovers by health care professionals

When people considered athletes are the only ones who are physically active, and the majority of a nation’s populace manifest sedentary lifestyles, preventable health problems develop. And, when millions of people suffer from preventable health problems, health care costs soar. These problems and costs limit sustainable development.

In response, health professionals start working on effective solutions. In fact, in many parts of the world, the new exercise and physical education leaders are nurses, health educators, physicians, psychologists, community planners, and social workers. Their ‘intrusion’ into SEPE’s preferred jurisdictions and operations is both understandable and predictable. It stems in part from incessant competition among the professions (e.g. Lawson, 1998c). It also stems from lucrative grants and contracts, which serve as incentives to innovation and effective action.

Arguably, some SEPF professionals may have a ‘trained incapacity’ to design alternatives apart from the institutionalized system into which they were socialised, a system they also may perpetuate. In other words, SEPE, professionals socially construct, and they are constituted by, elite sport’s institutionalized operations (Lawson, 1988). These socialization-institutionalized dynamics explain gaps in the fields knowledge base, including the lack of firm understanding about sedentary lifestyles (e.g. McElroy, 2002).

Later life health and health-enhancing environments

Here is another reason for new discourses and frameworks. People are living longer, and new kinds of exercise and health programs are vital to aging-prepared and elder-friendly communities. In many parts of the world, the conventional sport, exercise, and physical education system has little to offer this growing population of aging and elderly adults.

Furthermore, in many parts of the world, awareness has grown about the need to do more than teach, coach, and counsel individuals and groups. There is an accompanying need to create health-enhancing settings and environments, i.e. ones conductive to healthy lifestyles and supportive of human well-being (e.g. Lawson, 1992). An example from the United States illustrates this need.

American school physical education programs are designed to provide poor children and youth with sport and movement skills and exercise regimes, which they can use outside of school. Unfortunately, in a growing number of poor, urban communities, children and youth stay indoors because of the dangers of the street, especially gang-induced crime and violence. Many of these urban children live in homes where lead-based paint and asbestos insulation are commonplace; asbestos and lead paint cause asthma and other childhood diseases. Additionally, the toxic wastes and pollutants in nearby urban ‘brownfields’ contaminate the air and the water, and some cause cancer. When these problems prevail, there is a huge
mismatch between the design of SEPE programs and living conditions. Sustainable development is constrained, and program redesign is a practical necessity.

**Stand-alone or collaborate?**

Clearly, SEPE professionals and programs can’t fix problems involving sub-standard housing, unsafe streets and neighborhoods, toxic wastes, inadequate nutrition, and the several other problems that usually eventuate when poverty and its correlates prevail. Yet, unless something is done to address these multiple needs and problems, SEPE professionals will not be successful. Clearly, SEPE professionals depend fundamentally on other professionals and their programs and systems. If these other professionals, programs, and systems are effective and successful, then SEPE professionals and programs have a better chance of success.

Another choice follows from this logic. *Will SEPE professionals be prepared to collaborate with other professions, enabling the various programs and services to be connected and integrated?* If the answer is ‘no’ then stand-alone SEPE operations will persist, flawed programs will continue to be offered, and their potential contributions to sustainable development will remain untapped.

On the other hand, if the answer is ‘yes’, then SEPE professionals must be prepared to join a growing international movement that promotes ‘interprofessional collaboration’ (Lawson, 2003). Here, professionals from different fields know that they depend on each other; therefore, they work and learn together. In many parts of the world, this interprofessional collaboration movement is connected to university–school–community partnerships and to interprofessional education and training programs (Lawson, 2001). Collaboration also is a key to empowerment.

**Empowerment theory and practice**

There are countless definitions for, and approaches to, empowerment. These alternatives present other choices. These choices depend on precise, coherent, and practical definitions. After all, if people do not agree on what empowerment is, how can they talk about it? How can they be expected to implement, evaluate, and improve it?

*Empowerment as a contested concept*

Reflecting incentives in grants, contracts, and policy mandates, empowerment theory and practice have gained increasing popularity. This popularity has proven to be both beneficial and problematic.

The benefits include new ways of framing professionals’ orientations, roles, and responsibilities, yielding new practices and program designs. These several innovations promise improved outcomes.
The problems stem from variable, imprecise, incoherent, impractical, and ethically suspect conceptions of empowerment. In fact, a growing literature documents multiple problems, indicating that empowerment is a contested concept.

For example, Riger (1993) suggests that individual empowerment is the dominant conception, and it promotes a special kind of masculinity and accompanying patriarchy. This individual empowerment conjures up images of 'rugged individualism' especially the ability of people acting independently to 'pull themselves up by their own bootstraps' and become even more self-reliant. Riger claims that this version of individual empowerment is antithetical to feminist ideals, including women’s ways of knowing, being, and acting in the world. Beyond Riger’s critique, this view of empowerment also is at odds with a substantial research literature indicating that social support networks are essential to pathways out of poverty (e.g. Danziger & Chin Lin, 2003).

Another example: Gore (1993) provides a penetrating critique at practicing professionals. She takes aim at professionals who automatically justify their practices as empowerment-oriented, but who do little to consult and involve the people they claim to be empowering. For Gore, this is professional arrogance operating under the guise of empowerment, and arrogant professionals may cause harm in the name of service.

Exploring empowerment theory

Clearly, empowerment needs to be defined clearly and coherently, and this definition also needs to be actionable. Professionals and persons from all walks of life must be able to ask and answer two basic questions. How would you know empowerment if you saw it? How would you be able to determine if you were doing good work in the name of empowerment? These questions introduce three keys to empowerment.

Power is one key to empowerment theory and practice. There are multiple facets of this power, including power over, power with, and power to (Lawson, 1998a). Essentially, empowerment denotes a fresh distribution of power. When power is viewed as finite, empowerment redistributes it. When power is viewed as infinite, empowerment shares it. In both cases, people once without power gain access to it. In brief, in order to know empowerment when you see it, you need to understand power distributions and authority relations, and you need to be able to determine how they change for the better as empowerment is practiced.

Resources are a second key to empowerment. Resources include money, non-monetary exchange and assistance networks, other people (especially ones with power and authority), and knowledge. Resources are linked to power (e.g., knowledge is power, and there’s power in knowledge). Even so the two concepts are analytically distinct. In brief, when you want to know whether you’re doing good in the name of empowerment, you need to know whether people manifesting needs gain access to one or more kinds of resources.
The third key, collaboration, follows suit. Collaboration entails, among other things, voluntary relations among equal partners (Lawson, 2003). Genuine empowerment proceeds in part through collaboration insofar as the person, group, or family being empowered is a partner in every aspect of the process and chooses to engage in the process. This voluntary, collaborative engagement by students, athletes, and ‘clients’ means that people manifesting needs determine which resources they want and need; when, where, and how they will gain access to them; and how the empowerment process will proceed. In other words, the target group (system) also is an essential part of the action system. When these several features obtain, genuine empowerment is in evidence.

Conceptualizing empowerment

Empowerment may be conceptualized in relation to these three keys: power, resources, and collaboration. Empowerment is a voluntary, collaborative process in which power and resources are redistributed and shared with the aim of enhancing individual and collective capacities, efficacy, and well-being, addressing inequities, and, where poverty is implicated, promoting social and economic justice. It helps individuals, families, groups, and entire neighborhood communities:

- gain a critical understanding of themselves and their environments, along with the power and authority, services, supports and resources they need and also may offer to others;
- develop collective identities and social solidarity, enabling them to mobilize for collective action;
- gain resources and power, enabling them to achieve individual and collective goals;
- achieve greater equity as they acquire and use their new power and resources; and
- enhance individual and collective capacities to sustain their achievements.

These empowerment outcomes are vital to plans for sustainable, integrated economic and social development, especially in high poverty communities.

From conception to action

Examples of empowerment practices signal alternative relations. Empowerment means asking, listening, and ‘giving away’ knowledge, resources, and expertise. Much like a social worker or a psychologist, the SEPE professional begins with two basic questions (Lawson, 1998b). How do you want to live, and how can I help you with this decision? How can I help you become the kind of person you have defined and help you succeed with all that you aspire to accomplish? These two questions mirror two fundamental principles of helping others.

The first principle: start where the client is and build from their worldview and needs. The second principle: Build on people’s identities and view helping as identity-
development—as the realization of ‘possible selves’. These twin principles guide effective, empowerment actions.

Basically, a person (usually a helping professional such as a teacher, coach, or social worker) or a group (e.g. a team) possesses one or more kinds of power and either has resources, or can provide access to them. This person or group functions as the sender (transmitter, conveyor) of power and resources (e.g. knowledge, money). The beneficiaries of power sharing and redistribution are known as recipients, clients, students, and athletes.

To reiterate, collaboration is one key to empowerment, and it entails developing conditional equality with the athlete, student, or adult. Although this equality is beneficial to the helping process, it also is the stumbling block for professionals from all walks life because, as this giveaway continues, the special status of the professional is eroded. The ‘bottom-line’ is this: Professionals who empower others may fear for their jobs. This is a significant constrain, i.e. a disincentive for empowerment.

Key questions follow from this logic. Are teachers, coaches, exercise leaders, and other professionals genuinely committed to sharing power and power-related resources with these beneficiaries? If so, how far are SEPE professionals prepared to go? Do these beneficiaries participate (collaborate) in the process? Do they actually gain power and resources, and do they mobilize them to improve their own lives and perhaps, others’ lives?

The answers hinge on at least four important contingencies. These are: (1) the extent to which SEPE professionals (senders) communicate and share power and resources efficiently and effectively; (2) the extent to which the intended beneficiaries collaborate with professionals, demonstrating that they want and need this power and these resources; (3) the extent to which beneficiaries develop the capacities to use their newly-acquired power and resources; and (4) the extent to which beneficiaries’ life circumstances and living conditions support the acquisition and use of new power and resources.

A fifth contingency is especially salient. When the SEPE professional recognizes that her/his success depends on the ‘co-production activities’ of the student, athlete, or client (e.g. Cahn, 2000), an empowerment-related incentive becomes apparent. The question is this: absent empowerment activities, will the student, athlete, or client accept joint responsibility and accountability for the desired outcomes and actively engage in the process of achieving these outcomes? This is a rhetorical question, and a familiar saying conveys its meaning. ‘You can lead a horse to water, but you can’t make it drink’.

The point is, SEPE professionals can do wonderful things for students, athletes, and clients in the name of empowerment, service, and helping. However, if the intended beneficiaries refuse to accept shared responsibility and accountability for the desired outcomes, they are not likely to commit themselves to the activities required to achieve them. Figuratively, they can be led to the water, but they won’t drink it. They aren’t served, and the professional isn’t successful. Under these conditions, empowerment is a practical necessity because professional effectiveness
depends on it. Ineffective professionals also risk losing their jobs, and this is another incentive for empowerment.

*Choices among three kinds of empowerment*

Three kinds of empowerment implicate choices and attendant consequences. The first choice, *false empowerment*, signals dangers and ethically suspect practices. Unfortunately, it is a common occurrence around the world. When professionals claim to be empowering others, when, in fact, they refuse to share power and power-related resources, false empowerment is in evidence. These professionals doubt whether clients should be, or can be empowered, and they enjoy making decisions for other people about how these people should conduct their lives. Their main rule is ‘Don’t ask, TELL people what to do’. They use empowerment rhetoric because they know it’s fashionable and persuasive. Others use it because it legitimates them and their work. Still others do so for impression management. They wish to create the impression that they acted rationally, when, in fact, they are using empowerment as a post-hoc, rational justification for self-interested, even carelessly selected, programs and practices (after Brown, 1978).

The second kind is *narrow empowerment*. This is a common practice in high poverty communities around the world. Narrow empowerment is a one-way process and it usually involves individuals. Individual professionals empower individual clients. Typically, these professionals provide knowledge and skills aimed at one kind of empowerment. Examples, include psychological empowerment and sport-specific empowerment.

When narrow empowerment is the norm, economic empowerment and group/community empowerment aimed at collective action usually get short shrift. Professionals from all walks of life expect poor people to ignore the material conditions surrounding their lives. No wonder that this narrow empowerment tends to be short-lived. People who don’t get enough to eat; lack shelter; don’t have jobs; face daily discrimination and isolation; and do not enjoy access to good schools and health/social services are consumed by the stress and demands of everyday living, including basic survival. Who can stay empowered under these trying circumstances?

The third kind is *collective comprehensive, mutual, and contagious empowerment*. It is collective because it transcends a narrow focus on individuals and targets groups and entire communities, aiming to organise and mobilize them for collective action. It is comprehensive because the several kinds of empowerment (e.g. sport-related, psychological, political, and economic) are integrated, and many professions join forces to collaborate.

It is mutual empowerment because professionals also are beneficiaries (Lawson, 1998a). When professionals are effective with students, athletes, and clients, their efficacy improves, and they also are empowered. Unlike narrow empowerment, which is a one way-process, this kind empowerment is a two way process. This
mutual empowerment also of contagious when it is planned in concert with a strong community development strategy. SEPE programs can benefit from such a strategy, making them amenable to community development. Details follow.

Community development and community builders

Community development is the concept employed to describe plans and activities for building, and re-building, local institutions and neighborhood structures. It is a special priority for localities challenged by poverty, social exclusion, social isolation, and inter-group conflict and hostility. Community developers are the professionals who have received special education and training for this work. They know how to organize and mobilize individuals, groups, and entire neighborhood communities for collective action in service of institutional development and change.

Community builders are the other professionals and everyday people who plan, implement, and evaluate community development (Ife, 1999). Together, professional community developers and community builders seek to engage everyday people, especially poor people, in the community development process. Here, empowerment meets community development. This combination of empowerment and community development characterizes some of the best practices around the world.

Examples of best practices

Drawing on expansive, international literature (e.g. Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; Chambers, 1994a,b; Ife, 1999), here are 17 examples of best practices. All are important: they are not rank-ordered. All are amenable to use by SEPE professionals as they develop community-oriented and -based programs and practices, especially ones that are empowerment-oriented.

1. Identify specific places, or locales, for empowerment-oriented community development and gain understanding of their social histories and local cultures.
2. Find and utilize local, indigenous ‘community guides’ who facilitate the entry of outsiders into tightly knit local communities (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993).
3. Don’t assume that ‘professionals know best’ regarding what other people want, need, and are able to accomplish. There will never be enough professionals, nor will professionals have sufficient expertise, to solve every community development problem.
4. Avoid pathology and the language of deficits and disease; instead, build from strengths and aspirations.
5. Ask local residents what they want, need, know, and are able to accomplish.
6. Engage local residents, especially the most vulnerable ones, as community builders, encouraging and supporting them in all aspects of community development.
In addition to community building and development efforts aimed at residents of targeted local neighborhoods, find, organize, and mobilize dedicated people who reside elsewhere and draw on the resources, power, authority, and social networks.

Don’t assume that poor people can be serviced out of poverty: include economic and occupational development initiatives, including ones that provide community development jobs to unemployed, poor people.

Support and strengthen families because they are the cornerstones of healthy communities, and vibrant societies.

Develop community schools, which combine after school programs, youth development, social and health services, and family support programs, because these schools are hubs of community development.

Use faith-based institutions such as mosques and churches as hubs of family support and community development, coordinating them with community schools.

Develop non-monetary mutual aid and assistance networks, especially Time Dollar programs.

Train and support ‘linkage agents’ and ‘boundary crossers’ because these persons will mobilize broad-based coalitions and collaboratives, which link, and integrate the activities and programs comprising community development interventions.

Identify and promote community-wide, positive social norms for sport, exercise, and physical education and integrate them with comparable norms for health, and well-being. Strong normative settings reinforce and promote knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors supportive of health and well-being.

Develop facilities such as bicycle paths, walking trails, and community centers which are conducive to exercise, convivial play, and health-enhancing behaviors.

Always personalize offerings. Don’t expect every program to work for every person and don’t expect people to come to you. Consider ‘targeting strategies’ (identifying and prioritizing special sub-populations) and ‘seeking strategies’ (actively finding and recruiting people instead of waiting for them to come to you).

Strengthen existing social networks and create new ones, encouraging them to ‘spread the word’. These networks are important vehicles for sustainable development, and they make the good news of community development contagious.

All of these best practices are relatively easy to learn and perform. The harder part is to convince SEPE professionals around the world to make the choices and changes needed to become more involved in empowerment-oriented, community development initiatives.
Linking SEPE programs to empowerment-oriented, community development

Mindful of the need for a coherent, action-oriented framework, Figure 2 depicts planning choices. The three darkened boxes at the bottom are programs for the masses. Important in their own right, they also serve as ‘feeder systems’; they prepare people for the other programs and opportunities identified above them. Note that two of the three programs require new preparation programs and courses for professionals working outside the elite, pro-olympic system. In turn, these programs require faculty prepared for their dissemination, research, and evaluation. In brief, these programs necessitate institutional development and change.

At the far left of this figure, pro-olympic sport’s contributions to community development are acknowledged. For example, pro-olympic sport has networks of fans and other supporters. Fans also spend money in a variety of places as they consume this sport. Additionally, this sport may unite diverse people, albeit only for brief periods of time (Smith & Ingham, 2003).

In brief, these fans, supporters, and this kind of sport make modest contributions to community development. In other words, pro-olympic sport is not inherently problematic. Pro-olympic sport poses a major problem when it is the only alternative; and when other alternatives that encourage health and wellbeing across the lifespan are dwarfed and thwarted by it.

Figure 2. Planning SEPE programs for health, well-being and community development.
For example, problems result when school and community physical education programs are tied exclusively to pro-olympic sport. To reiterate: countless students don’t want to become athletes. All have bodies. All need to be healthy and to enjoy wellbeing. This is why a dotted line in Figure 2 connects physical education programs to pro-olympic sport; and a firm, solid line connects these programs to educational sport and recreational-participatory sport. The main idea is clear: school programs must be oriented toward mass sport, as suggested by Crum’s (1998) model.

Educational sport, as indicated in Figure 2, also is very important (Lawson & Morford, 1979). Note its relations with participatory sport, other exercise programs, and health and nutrition programs. Also note that it is separate from school and community physical education.

Educational sport merits special emphasis because it serves adults and elders who may ‘take up’ competitive sport later in their lives. Competitive races that attract millions of participants around the world, many of whom did not become committed to running races until later in their lives, comprise an obvious example.

Educational sport merits special emphasis for another reason, one that is directly connected to an important indicator of well-being and fosters sustainable development. This indicator is peaceful, harmonious relationships. Unless special interventions are included in sport teaching, coaching, and participation, it is unlikely that sport will yield peaceful, harmonious relationships. To the contrary, sport contests involving diverse people may produce conflicts. Educational sport provides the opportunity to develop sport-specific interventions for promoting positive inter-group relations. An established line of research that indicates how to change stereotypes about ‘out-groups’; how to build friendships among groups once hostile to each other; and how to create behavioral and organizational settings that are conducive to friendly, peaceful, and harmonious relations (e.g. Pettigrew, 1998; Gatz et al., 2002; Hewstone et al., 2002). This important opportunity, once maximized, will facilitate community development and, in turn, sustainable development.

As Figure 2 also suggests that there is a special need for new exercise programs that are not sport (Kimieck & Lawson, 1996). Examples include aerobic dance, walking, hiking, and dancing. Similarly, convivial play and voluntary associations are vital to both civic life and community development; examples include an infinite variety of games, agonal contests, and the creative play of children, adults, and family networks, school and community programs that foster these non-sport alternatives are needed alongside school and community physical education.

Additionally, specially prepared exercise and play-recreational leaders are needed. These leaders must know the theory and practice of lifespan-oriented, human health and well-being as well as empowerment and community development. They also must be prepared for interprofessional collaboration.

Note that Figure 2 also includes social and health services, health education, and nutrition. These companion services and programs are especially important when high poverty communities are targeted. For, in these localities, substance abuse,
All of the programs depicted in Figure 2 are associated with identifiable social networks, i.e. the kinds that facilitate sustainable development. As Figure 2 indicates, these networks include youth development and family support networks (see the top box in this figure).

Last, but not least, economic development initiatives are vital to a new approach that prioritizes human health and well-being across the lifespan. In this figure diagram, SEPE professionals and their programs can contribute to economic development as they serve as anti-poverty mechanisms. Three brief examples must suffice.

Public schools can be strong anti-poverty mechanisms, as indicated earlier, and they are instruments for human capital development. Effective schools depend in part on parent involvement. With this link in mind, community schools in several parts of the world serve as hubs of family support and community development, in part because they offer after school and weekend programs. In the US, for example, Beacon Schools never close their doors. The most popular programs in many to these community schools are play, exercise and sport programs for people of all ages. Poor parents, many of whom have had bad experiences in schools, choose to become more involved, in their children’s school because of their own participation in SEPE programs. In fact, some parents serve as leaders of these programs, recruiting still other parents and strengthening these schools. These family-supportive community schools become assets for sustainable development in part because of SEPE programs and the parents and families they attract.

A second example: politicians in a small US town, which suffered from unemployment and poverty, approved funding for a bicycle and walking trail to replace the railroad tracks (which had not been used for years). The trail became popular immediately, and thousands of individuals and families began to use it regularly. Small businesses (micro-enterprises) took root. Bicycle rental shops, athletic shoe shops, small refreshment stands, and a restaurant opened, and all were immediately successful. In short, simply by creating a new exercise and play facility, one that was ‘friendly’ to its users, these politicians encouraged mass exercise, family support, social networks, AND economic development.

The third example: through the use of an amazing non-monetary mutual assistance and exchange system called ‘Time Dollar’, neighbors get to know and help other neighbors. They provide for each other goods and services without any need to exchange money. This non-monetary exchange system is based on their talents and willingness to share them. For each hour a person serves others, this person receives one time dollar. So, for example, one person cuts another’s hair and earns time dollars. The person whose hair was cut paints another’s house and earns time dollars. Students who behave appropriately in school and who help clean up the school grounds earn time dollars. Each time dollar is recorded (“banked”). When a person has accumulated enough time dollars to obtain a good or service, the ”purchase” can be made.
The upshot is this: people use time dollars to purchase goods and services that support their education, play, and occupational development. For example, a mother who wants to exercise and play can use time dollars to purchase child care. At an elementary school where I serve as an assistant, students use their time dollars to purchase school supplies, alarm clocks, and other goods a school store. Parents who earn time dollars helping other parents and working with kids in an after-school program have used their time dollars to purchase computers at this school store. In brief, this time-dollar model offers untapped potential for SEPE programs and professionals, and it is suited ideally for empowerment and community development models and practices. It is vital to sustainable development initiatives in high poverty communities. And it involves collaboration with social workers, signaling the social work of SEPE programs.

**Collaboration with social workers**

Practicing social workers around the world rely on empowerment and community development models and strategies (e.g. Ife, 1999), and these models and strategies also are mainstays in social work research and education programs. More than any other profession, social workers employ empowerment and community development to combat the antecedents, correlates, causes, and consequences of widespread poverty, social exclusion, social isolation, and inter-group conflict and hostility.

Social workers strive to achieve three related aims. First, they aim to improve the health and well-being of poor, vulnerable, and oppressed people across the life course. Second, they aim to improve the places where these people live. More specifically, social workers strive to develop special kinds of local communities—communities that promote people’s health and well-being and, at the same time, contribute to sustainable, integrated social and economic development. Third, social workers aim to improve governments and policies. In particular, they are strong, persistent advocates for social, economic, political, and environmental justice. In support of their advocacy, they mobilize diverse people, and they develop political coalitions to effect improvements in governments and their policies. These three aims quickly can become three aims for SEPE professionals, i.e. aims they share with social workers.

Moreover, social workers share a particular view of the world. Like the frame for a painting or a picture, this view frames social work practices and policies. Most social workers call this view ‘the person-in-environment’ framework. Both inside and outside of social work, this view is perhaps better known as ‘the social-ecological framework’ (e.g. Lawson, 1992). Whatever its name, this framework emphasizes relationships among individuals, families, groups, communities, organizations, institutions, governments, and their environments. For example, when social workers focus on a child, they also strengthen, support, and empower the family; and, at the same time, they develop community assistance, support, and resource networks. In short, social workers learn how to effect simultaneous changes in people, organiza-
tions, and communities because, when widespread poverty persists, narrow and linear (‘one at a time’) interventions often are not effective.

Thus, the profession of social work has much to offer SEPE professionals (Lawson & Anderson-Butcher, 2001). Expert social workers are prepared to collaborate with SEPE professionals and with other professions because they have learned that no single profession can do all of the work required to empower people and let develop local communities. And once SEPE professionals have been prepared to collaborate, they will offer much in return to social work. In short, these new relationships between SEPE professionals and social workers will strengthen and expand empowerment and community development models and strategies. As these models and strategies improve, people and communities in need will benefit, enhancing sustainable development.

To recapitulate: this new SEPE social work is two-dimensional. First, it is SEPE-specific; it entails modifying and expanding existing programs to assist, support, and resource people in need and help prevent social problems.

Second, this SEPE social work is empowerment-oriented, collaborative and comprehensive. This second dimension of SEPE social work entails collaborating with social workers and others to create healthy communities and sustainable societies. Here SEPE practices and programs are integrated with other initiatives, programs, and practices, including youth development programs, family support initiatives, health and mental health initiatives, crime prevention and anti-violence initiatives, and economic development initiatives. Interprofessional collaboration provides the social glue that cements these diverse initiatives in a comprehensive, coherent plan. Furthermore, empowerment-oriented community development emphasizes collaboration with individuals, families, and entire neighborhood communities (Lawson, 2003). Such multifaceted collaboration is needed to address serious challenges and issues.

Clearly, a choice is involved. Will SEPE professionals join social workers in dedicating themselves to addressing the plight of poor, oppressed populations and contributing to sustainable development? If the answer is ‘no’ SEPE professionals may expect representatives of other professions to assume responsibility for empowerment-oriented, community-building via SEPE programs and practices. After all, poverty and its correlates cannot be wished away, and, as poverty persists and even grows, sustainable development is constrained. Governments cannot allow this condition to continue.

**Globalization’s emergent and persistent challenges**

International collaboration among SEPE scholars aimed at feasible, coherent, and action-oriented frameworks must accommodate emergent and persistent challenges. Some of these challenges may be viewed as ‘wicked problems’—lasting ones that defy easy and immediate solution (e.g. Lawson, 2003). Many are associated with, and caused by, globalization.
Globalization is a multifaceted, complex, process that involves the new economy, but does not end there (Lawson, 2001). As everyone knows, globalization ‘shrinks the world’. It promotes extensive international and intercultural contacts and interactions. It results in interdependent communities of fate. The mass media and computer technologies are among its main instruments of exchange. Another is the unprecedented, mass migration of the world’s people across national borders and entire continents. These several changes and others are cause for concern about the integrity of local and national customs and traditions, both religious and secular.

In fact, local resistance to massive globalization helps explain why localized empowerment and community development models are gaining popularity in education, social welfare, health, mental health, environmental protection, and criminal justice. In short, if you are worried about globalization, then empowerment-oriented, community development via the social work of SEPE programs is a viable, important alternative. Many of the issues, indeed the wicked problems, must be understood and resolved by professionals, religious leaders, and everyday people in local communities. In other words, these issues and problems are foci for empowerment-oriented, community development, and this is one reason why the slogan think globally, act locally is so popular.

Examples of issues requiring global thinking and local action include:

- the globalization of sport, especially the pro-olympic kind, and its assault on local games, agonal contests, play forms, and exercise practices;
- the globalization of the English language, and the accompanying assault on local language practices and traditions;
- the globalization of lifestyles and identities, especially the lifestyles and identities of children and youth and the attendant challenges to traditional institutions (Miles, 2000; Wyn & Dwyer, 2000);
- the globalization of social movements, including the women’s movement and its challenges to Islamic traditions;
- the globalization of terrorism and crime, especially youth gangs;
- the globalization of social welfare policies, including the downsizing of the welfare state, the requirements of structural adjustment programs, and the loss of programs, services, and supports for the poor; and
- the globalization of American social science, including the attendant threats and problems for other nations (e.g. Anderson, 2003).

Leaders and participants in empowerment-oriented, community development initiatives, like leaders of new SEPE practices, programs, and policies, will not be able to avoid these vexing challenges and others.

Comprehensive collaboration, starting with religious leaders and including everyday people from all walks of life, is the one sure way to address them. This is why empowerment, community development, and collaboration have become so popular. Presented with wicked problems for which they are few easy, effective
solutions, diverse people simply must collaborate, sharing knowledge as they figure out what they need to figure out and do. Once again, the implication is clear: SEPE professionals need to gain competence for empowerment, community building, and collaboration.

In conclusion: SEPE operations, freedom, and sustainable development

Amartya Sen (1999), an internationally renowned economist, emphasizes Development as Freedom. What an apt title this is for SEPE practices, programs, and policies! For, what are sport, exercise, play, and physical education about, and for, if not human freedom? When terror persists and freedom is gone, can humans be healthy and enjoy well-being? Can any of us develop our full potential? The answers to these questions are self-evident, but the attendant contributions of SEPE practices, policies, programs, and professionals are not.

The essence of SEPE work lies in liberating and empowering people, enabling them to eliminate terror, find joy, maximize their freedom, and improve their health and well-being. This empowerment-oriented freedom has a dual character. It is freedom from terror, oppression and the ills of poverty; and it is freedom to choose, starting with what to do, play, and create. Both empowerment-oriented community development and sustainable development depend on this dual freedom, and it is integral to the social work of SEPE programs, practices, and policies.

Arguably, systems around the world are not oriented toward this new SEPE social work. And because they are not, important questions and serious doubts remain about whether SEPE professionals, programs, and practices are worthwhile investments for governments. Therein lies the final and ultimate choice.

The import of this choice becomes apparent when another American saying is referenced ‘You can’t have it both ways’. That is, you can’t avoid and resist the massive challenges of institutional development and change and, at the same time, expect governmental leaders to invest in current SEPE operations. So, if you want SEPE professionals to collaborate with social workers and others to improve health and wellbeing and address poverty and its correlates, you’ll have to prepare them to do so. If you want SEPE professionals to become community builders, helping to create strong, vibrant communities in which tales of terror are transformed into stories of freedom and joy, you’ll have to prepare them to do so. If you want SEPE professionals and their programs and practices to empower people and contribute to community development, you’ll have to design them accordingly.

All of these new designs implicate institutional development and change. Although the attendant challenges are profound and pervasive, the potential benefits far outweigh the costs of innovation and transformation. Governmental investments in SEPE professionals, programs, practices, and policies, in service of sustainable development, are immediate benefits. The more lasting, important benefits involve the people, localities, and nations being served.
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Notes

1. Social capital is the popular concept used in lieu of social network. Its ambiguities and contested meaning cause problems (e.g. Edmondson, 2003). Social network captures my meaning more precisely, and methodologies for social network analysis are established firmly.

2. This bold claim implicates the structure–agency duality. Professional education programs and governmental curriculum mandates are two powerful structures, and they are more powerful when they interact. When they are silent on the alternatives, programs and mandates structure a trained incapacity. Even when these structures are attended to alternatives, SEPE recruits, professional education students, and practicing professional remains as active agents with capacities for resistance, reformation, and transformation. In this second instance, trained incapacity is the result of active agent’s orientations, identities, and actions in the face of powerful structures. Richard Tinning’s developing research at the University of Queensland (Australia) provides a case in point.

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