Volunteers in the sport for development and peace sector: antinomies, liminality, and structural relations

Richard Giulianotti, Holly Collison and Simon Darnell

ABSTRACT

In this paper, we seek to advance understandings of the contemporary global ‘sport for development and peace’ (SDP) sector, with respect to volunteers and volunteering in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Volunteers play a critical role in organizing and delivering SDP social intervention programmes across the world; most SDP volunteer work is undertaken by local young people who are often presented as a current peer or future community leaders. Specifically, we utilize a unique combination of the concepts of antinomy and liminality to examine systematically the ‘in-between’ positions, roles, and experiences of SDP volunteers. Our analysis spotlights three sets of antinomy. First, categorical antinomies relate to the liminal or in-between positioning of volunteers in terms of their socio-demography (e.g. between adolescence and adulthood), status within NGOs (as neither paid employees nor programme user groups), and their standing between NGOs and communities. Second, the structural antinomies of volunteers relate to the empowering/disempowering aspects of development, positioning between the international development and national public sectors, and their standing between civil society and the private sector. Third, the social antinomies of volunteering centre on their relations with the development NGO, links to donors, and volunteer positions in regard to programme sustainability. The paper draws on an extensive interview- and fieldwork-based research into SDP in three diverse locations (Kosovo, Rwanda, and Sri Lanka) as part of a wider cross-cultural research project on the global SDP sector. The findings may be used as an analytical framework for future research into volunteering, in other SDP locations, in other fields of sport, or on wider social and development sectors, such as in education, community and youth work, leisure and recreation.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 18 September 2020
Accepted 8 March 2021

KEYWORDS

Sport; development; peace; volunteering; antinomy; liminality

Introduction

The global Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) sector is comprised of organizations, governing bodies and actors which mobilize and organize sport in the service of meeting non-sport goals (see Giulianotti et al., 2019). Typically, such goals include gender empowerment, education and health promotion, and peacebuilding and conflict resolution, and are usually aligned with the global
development goals of the United Nations, particularly the Sustainable Development Goals. SDP is now recognized as an important subset of the global sport landscape.

The emergence and institutionalization of SDP occurred in part through the integration of sport programmes into the traditional structures and vectors of international development at the end of the twentieth century, which saw development aid and expertise flow primarily from the global North to South. Substantial research has examined these structural and organizational aspects of SDP, usually from a variety of critical sociological and development studies perspectives on North-to-South relations (Darnell & Millington, 2019; Giulianotti et al., 2019). At the same time, and benefitting in particular from anthropological approaches and influences, diverse scholarship has recently examined how SDP is constructed and experienced within local or host communities, for example through the influence of local cultural identities, social structures, and knowledge systems; socially inclusive leadership in SDP programming; and, south-south development cooperation through sport (Collison, 2016; Collison et al, 2019; Giulianotti et al., 2016; Nicholls et al., 2011; Richards, 1997).

It is well established within the SDP literature that volunteers play a critical role in the SDP sector at local, national, and global levels, particularly in enabling SDP programmes and other activities to take place in diverse settings. SDP volunteers tend to be young people, and their involvement in SDP is often portrayed by NGOs and other agencies as crucial in developing young leaders for local communities (Coalter, 2013, pp. 160–3). As we discuss below, to date most research on SDP volunteers has considered the motivations, social capital aspects, and transnational structural divisions associated with volunteering; and, has focused particularly on international volunteers who travel North-to-South to deliver SDP programmes. There has been significantly less research, however, that has theoretically and empirically examined the positions of local volunteers who undertake SDP work within low- and middle-income countries (LMICs).

In this paper, we seek to move towards filling this research gap by addressing the positions of local volunteers within contemporary SDP activity and programming. Drawing on fieldwork and interviews in several national SDP settings, we examine specifically the antinomies of volunteering, and the ‘in-between’ and liminal positions of volunteers, within the contemporary SDP sector. As we suggest, these liminal antinomies mirror in part the broader in-between positions of many young people in LMICs who are seriously affected by poverty, deep social divisions, state fragility, and histories of conflict. Overall, we argue that local volunteers in SDP are constituted by, and constitutive of, the structures and power relations of SDP more broadly. In turn, their experiences, including successes and struggles, help to illustrate both the possibilities and limitations of organizing sport towards development and peace.

To that end, our paper is organized into four main parts. First, we examine prior research in the field of SDP/sport and volunteering and explain the key concepts of liminality and antinomy which guide our study. Second, we detail our research methods and research locations. We then present our research findings, which organize the antinomies of SDP volunteering into three broad areas. Finally, we provide a discussion and concluding comments with respect to these findings, including consideration of the implications of our study for the SDP sector.

Volunteering and SDP

According to Davis Smith (1998, p. 10), volunteering is ‘any activity that involves spending time, unpaid, doing something that aims to benefit the environment or someone (individuals and groups) other than, or in addition to, close relatives’ (cited in Burgham & Downward, 2005). Some scholars have drawn specific attention to the links between volunteering and education, particularly in contexts (such as the UK) where higher education student volunteering is supported by government and through policy (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2012). The importance of volunteering for students as an educational experience often presumes that students will develop new skills through volunteering, that the institutions supporting volunteers (i.e. schools or universities) will develop stronger
community relations, and that there are clear beneficiaries of volunteer activity (Holdsworth & Quinn, 2012).

To date, a significant volume of work has been undertaken on volunteers in the SDP sector. This research has been primarily in the fields of sport management and sociology, as well as in education and pedagogy, and has explored three main themes in SDP volunteering, often in interconnecting ways.

First, the motivations, learning dispositions, and commitments of individual volunteers have drawn significant attention. This literature has found that SDP volunteers are motivated by a range of factors, including the values of the SDP organization they serve, exposure to new social relations, strong learning environments, opportunities for career development and self-enhancement, and, particularly for international volunteers, new cultural experiences and ‘giving back’ through sport (Peachey et al., 2014; Smith et al., 2014). Further, notable research has differentiated between ‘core’ and ‘peripheral’ volunteers in sport (Ringuet-Riot et al., 2014); and, called attention to shifts in volunteer motivations from extrinsic factors (such as career interests) to intrinsic ones (such as fun of participation) (Hayton, 2016). Overall, this theme reflects the importance of understanding individual as well as institutional aspects of volunteering (Wicker, 2017).

Second, extensive research has examined the links between sport/SDP volunteering and social capital. Volunteering may increase ‘social connectedness’, the development of relationships, education and learning, and motivations to pursue social change (Kay & Bradbury, 2009; Peachey et al., 2015). SDP volunteering may also promote social and human capital among young people by providing ‘opportunities to participate in decision-making, confront exploitative gender relations, encourage ambition and recognize the value of education, [and] develop relationships based on trust and reciprocity’ (Coalter, 2013, p. 172). The social theories of Putnam (2000) and Bourdieu (1984) have particularly shaped these analyses: volunteering has been found to strengthen ‘bonding’ (inner-group) and, to a lesser extent, ‘bridging’ (cross-group) varieties of social capital. At the same time, volunteering may also reinforce the ‘dark side’ of social capital, by re-emphasizing existing social ties, hierarchies, and solidifying the exclusion of outsiders (Darcy et al., 2017; Harvey et al., 2007; Whittaker & Holland-Smith, 2016; cf. Coalter, 2013).

A third, mainly sociological theme locates SDP volunteering within the national and transnational political contexts of neoliberalism, post-colonialism, and deeply divided global development (e.g. Darnell, 2012; Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011; Mwaanga & Banda, 2014). This approach posits that, since the 1980s, the imposition of neoliberal social policies has left huge gaps in education and other social welfare provisions, particularly in LMICs. SDP programmes, assisted by voluntary labour, have come to provide one cheap, energetic (but ultimately inadequate) response to addressing these vast shortfalls and inequalities in resources and power (cf. Hartmann & Kwauk, 2011). Young volunteers within SDP may also be presented as embodying the ‘neoliberal subject’: self-motivated, self-reliant, entrepreneurial, and open to development into a ‘young leader’ but largely ignorant or unaware of the broader historical and geopolitics of unequal development (cf. Eley & Kirk, 2002; Eliasoph, 2013, pp. 94–218; Morgan, 2013). Research in this field has also critically explored the post-colonial politics of international, North-to-South volunteering (Darnell, 2010, 2012; Lucas & Jeanes, 2020; Tiessen, 2011; Van Luijk et al., 2019; Vrasti, 2013). This research has tended to conclude that one potential consequence of the North-to-South volunteering process has been the silencing or marginalization of local or indigenous voices within LMICs and through development processes (Banda & Holmes, 2017; cf. Manley et al., 2016).

Overall, these literatures – centred on individual motivations, social capital, and transnational structural divisions – have significantly advanced understandings of SDP volunteering. However, a significant research gap remains in examining the positionality of volunteers, particularly those from within LMICs themselves, and within the context of international SDP. To address this lacuna, below we focus on the significance of local and national SDP volunteers within LMICs. Our analysis draws out the importance of understanding the antinomies of volunteering, and the ‘in-between’, liminal positioning and statuses of young people as SDP volunteers. To that end, we
turn now to set out the concepts of liminality and antinomies before applying these to the SDP volunteer context.

The liminality and antinomies of volunteering

Liminality refers to the ambiguous and complex condition of occupying a space between a network of social classifications within a given cultural system (Turner, 1969). The anthropologist Victor Turner theorized liminality by applying the work of Max Gluckman, and the ritual theory of Arnold Van Gennep on rites of passage. These rites of passage contain three phases: separation, marginality and aggregation (Van Gennep, 1960). Focusing on the second phase, marginality, Turner conceptualized liminality in relation to social status and cultural states. Youth represents a key liminal category in the personal life-course and the wider social order; until they achieve the symbols of adulthood, young people often remain in post-childhood spaces that still tend to be considered as passive, status-less, and lacking the power or attributes aligned with varying forms of social mobility and recognition. To gain adult status, the symbols of adulthood need to be acquired or collected, for example in the form of gaining economic resources, participation within formal institutions or structures, or asserting power over others.

The concept of liminality has immediate attractions for understanding volunteers within the SDP and development contexts. In LMICs, which are often affected by conflict, poverty, and limited formal education opportunities, youth may find themselves in suspension, and unable to progress through once-normal stages of the life-course. In terms of liminality theory, compensatory or remedial roles, statuses and activities need to be identified or created, in order to offer some alternative routes towards or into adulthood. In development contexts of high unemployment, little social and geographical mobility, and few other opportunities for young people, volunteering may provide one possible symbolic step away from adolescence and towards adult status.

Some prior research has drawn partly on liminality theory to consider the position of sport-related volunteering, with a focus on student volunteers and their integration into development or outreach settings (see Hayton, 2017). However, in contrast, this paper concentrates on local and national volunteers in their ‘home’ locations, rather than on those who are ‘outsiders’ to their work settings. Unlike these outsiders, local or national volunteers tend to have relatively similar class, ethnonational, and social backgrounds to programme user groups.

The related concept of antinomy refers here to a tension, contradiction or opposition between ‘two apparently indubitable propositions’, rules, principles, or standpoints. Thus, the concept draws attention to the liminal space between two clearly defined categorical standpoints or conditions. The concept of antimony has been used in social science, the arts, and humanities, to explore the underlying paradoxes within different social theories or the work of diverse social theorists (Alexander, 2014; Anderson, 2017; Elliott, 2000; Kant, 1781/2007; McCole, 1993).

A good example is the work of Stebbins (2000), who identified two broad antinomies within volunteering: the tensions between the sense of obligation and choosing to volunteer, and how volunteering falls in the space between work and leisure. Here, we examine the antinomies of volunteering in depth and detail, through a more extensive, systematic, and rigorous analysis that considers the array of paradoxes, tensions, and contradictions within volunteering in the specific field of SDP. Therefore, in addition to exploring volunteering empirically, we offer a theoretical contribution that extends and applies the concepts of antinomies and liminality to the study of volunteers.

Methods

The data presented in this paper was collected from fieldwork conducted as part of the Sport for a Better World? research project, between 2014 and 2017. The broad aim of the study was to investigate, and to compare and contrast, the organization and implementation of SDP activity, at both global and local levels and in different geographic and cultural locations. The project focused on
three areas of significant SDP activity – promoting human rights, peace-building, and the social inclusion of people with disabilities – and research was undertaken in Jamaica (Kingston), Kosovo, Rwanda, and Sri Lanka. These locations were chosen strategically: they each represent a major geographic and cultural region (The Caribbean, South-East Europe, Central Africa, and South Asia, respectively) and therefore offered a diversity of cultural, historical and political contexts in and through which to understand SDP structures, stakeholders and activity.

The research was conducted using qualitative sociological and anthropological approaches to fieldwork and interviewing. Fieldwork was conducted at least twice in each research location, for a minimum period of 2–4 weeks per visit, and consisted of participant observation, consultation (if or as requested), and formal and informal interviews with SDP user groups, NGO personnel, volunteers, local leaders, and in-country stakeholders and policymakers. In total, some 200 interviews were conducted across the four locations, of which a substantial sample [n-70] were with local and international volunteers. On completing data collection, the research team conducted comparative analyses by sharing fieldwork reports, notes and interview results, and worked to identify key and emerging themes between and across the different research sites. In this paper, we have focused on data from three research locations: Kosovo, Rwanda, and Sri Lanka; we found that very limited volunteering was prevalent in Jamaica.

The immersive approach to fieldwork undertaken, and commitment to participatory engagement, building relationships, and exploring the realities of how SDP organizations operate, allowed us to interrogate the complex positioning, roles, statuses, and experiences of volunteers. This research approach led us to consider the ‘place’ of volunteers in relation to other types of social actors, and other social categories, within the SDP ecosystem. We were also able to examine the liminal antinomies of volunteers vis-à-vis their local communities, NGOs, donors, the field of international development, the public (governmental) sector, civil society, and the market. In this sense, while the research with volunteers themselves was important, so too were interviews with other key SDP stakeholders, such as NGO officials, who helped us to investigate and understand the role of volunteering in SDP.

In most locations, volunteers played critical roles in delivering programmes in ways that reflected their different levels of training and experience with the NGO. At the community level, more experienced and older volunteers tended to be in charge of programme sessions with assistance from younger volunteers who had often recently emerged from among the programme participants. These sessions would usually be visited and observed at some point by NGO officials or the most senior volunteers who held overall coordinating roles, for example in ensuring that sessions were organized, resourced, and running across the country.

In turn, our interactions with volunteers in the research process provoked a sense of reflexivity with respect to deeply embedded power inequalities and ethical issues in conducting international research. As three white, global North researchers conducting fieldwork in LMIC contexts, our observations of, and interactions with the local SDP community, including volunteers, needed to be negotiated sensitively and consistently, and at individual-to-individual level, rather than by securing access through organizational hierarchies. We ensured that SDP volunteers provided their full informed consent to participate in the project prior to their involvement; and, all data presented in this paper has been anonymized in order to protect the research participants.

**Research locations**

This section offers a brief overview of the three research locations from which data is presented. First is Kosovo. A middle-income country, Kosovo is a small, disputed state, and former province of Yugoslavia located in south-east Europe. Its 1.9 million population, Europe’s youngest, is comprised of around 90% ethnic Albanian, with small minorities of Serbians and other nationalities (notably, Roma, Ashkali, and Egyptians). Kosovo emerged out of the 1998–99 Kosovo War between Serbian and Albanian forces, which saw an estimated 13,500 deaths, and continues to
endure major societal challenges, notably deep social divisions along ethnic, linguistic, gender, disability, and urban-rural lines; and, very high levels of unemployment, poverty, and political corruption. Kosovo has a well-established SDP sector, featuring two large NGOs, and a growing range of smaller ones, which rely heavily on community-based volunteers drawn particularly from schools, colleges, and sport clubs.

Second, the middle-income country of Sri Lanka has a long history of ethnic, religious, and political divisions, and associated violent conflict. This culminated in the 1983–2009 civil war fought mainly in the Tamil-controlled northern and eastern regions (Moorcraft, 2012). In the post-war context, the majority Buddhist Sinhalese and minority Hindu Tamils continue their separate cultural traditions with respect to language, caste, religion, and work. The SDP sector has attempted to utilize the national game of cricket as a beacon of stability, unity, and peace; and positions sport broadly as a means to facilitate north–south communication and links, particularly for young people. SDP activity is also organized to challenge inter-ethnic inequalities, with sport used for social mobility and employment. Volunteers, often young aspiring athletes, manoeuvre within established business models of development, combining community service through sport with athletic development.

Third, in the low-income country of Rwanda, the 1994 genocide, which saw the death of 1 million Rwandans over a 100-day period, continues to frame the national development strategy (Uvin, 1998). Cautious post-genocide reconstruction has been marked by development models of local empowerment and partnerships with international agencies, alongside governmental policies to remove the distinctive ethnic identities of Hutu, Tutsi, and Twa. This environment has created opportunities for the SDP sector to grow and to attempt to harness community engagement and participation in delivering sport-based interventions focused on social development and unity. Given this context, in Rwanda local volunteers are particularly vital for the delivery of SDP curriculums, programmes, and wider community activities.

The liminal antinomies of volunteers

Overall, across our three research locations, we found that the SDP volunteers were forced to negotiate a large number and variety of liminal antinomies in and through their work. These fell into three broad areas or sets, which we discuss in turn: the categorical antinomies of volunteers; the structural relations of volunteers within development and SDP; and, the social relations of volunteering. Again, our primary focus here is on local/national volunteers, particularly in the first and third areas; international volunteers were more prominent in relation to the second area, and in relation to the politics of international development and SDP activity.

The categorical antinomies of volunteers

The first set of liminal antinomies faced by the volunteers in our study related to the core, categorical dichotomies and liminalities of their social role within SDP. These antinomies were mainly concerned with the societal, development and community statuses of volunteers. Three main types of liminality were evidenced here.

First, were the socio-demographic antinomies of volunteers. As noted at the outset, a core antinomy here for volunteers related to their life-course positioning. Most volunteers we encountered were young people in the midst of transition from childhood and adolescence into adulthood. Volunteers were usually older than the user groups with the SDP programmes. At the same time, volunteers were also usually younger than SDP agency officials and were still some way short of entering adulthood in terms of work or autonomy. They were often still in education (further, higher, or late secondary levels), and lacked the financial security to leave the family home. In line with the social theory of liminality as outlined earlier, this period of generational transition would be relatively smooth if it carried a finite duration and a defined, culturally appropriate pathway for moving into adulthood. However, as we also underlined earlier, in LMICs (and, indeed,
increasingly in the global North as well), young people must endure long periods of ‘waithood’, of very uncertain duration and direction, as they remain in extended adolescence prior to adulthood, particularly due to the lack of secure work (Ungruhe & Esson, 2017). In such circumstances, young people must navigate highly uneven and precarious pathways into adulthood, such as by working in the informal economy and pragmatically developing their everyday social capital to enhance their prospects for some employment.

In theory, volunteering in SDP may offer one further, albeit uncertain, route out of this protracted ‘waithood’, and into secure adulthood. Yet, at the same time, we found that volunteering was fraught with limitations. In our research locations, the direct benefits of volunteering were not obvious, as explained by Arjun, an NGO founder in Sri Lanka:

> In Sri Lanka there is a big focus on young people to get a good education and families are competitive between themselves. You want to be better than your neighbour. So, local volunteers are rare because people don’t value things with no financial things back.

In addition, volunteering in sport was not necessarily seen as a way to transform the social standing of young people, particularly from the viewpoint of wider community members. As Paul, a young Rwandan SDP volunteer, explained:

> I become a volunteer to learn for a job, but people just see me as a young person with a whistle, they don’t take me seriously outside of the field.

A further aspect of socio-demographic liminality related to the in-between positioning of volunteers in regard to social stratification. As reflected in part by their educational status, most volunteers held relatively secure and socially incorporated backgrounds and tended not to come from the most disadvantaged communities in terms of class, ethnicity, and disability. For example, in Kosovo, it was common to find young SDP volunteers who were well motivated within secondary, further or higher education, or who had already acquired qualifications, for example in teaching. At the same time, young volunteers often lacked the advantages of secure employment or significant wealth, the geographical mobility of national elites, or especially the first-world privileges of ‘internationals’ (whether these were development sector officials or student volunteers) who arrived from the global North.

A second, liminal categorical status for volunteers related to their in-between positioning within the delivery NGO or programme. Volunteers were neither programme user groups (though they often had emerged from these ranks); nor were they paid officials within the NGO. In acting as volunteers, some young people were working to strengthen their prospects of future employment within the NGO. However, more pragmatically, the volunteer role sometimes provided the only way for young people to continue their programme involvement and benefit from the forms of sociability that SDP afforded, such as time with friends who also became volunteers, or with younger relatives and peers who remained among the user groups. One result of this was that, for young volunteers, there was a tendency to focus on enabling younger peers to play and to have fun, while ignoring the development messages that were promoted by older volunteers and officials. As David in Rwanda commented:

> The children in the community just want to play, sometimes they don’t listen and if the big coach is not here, I just let them play their own things. When the big coach is here, we can do more activities that teach them different things to be better people.

A third liminal category related to the positional antinomy of volunteers between the NGO and the community, in representing the former while belonging to the latter. This liminal positioning meant that volunteers sometimes acted as a bridge or an intermediary between the NGO and the community, albeit with the greater benefits clearly falling to the NGO rather than the community. For example, NGOs often used the local social capital of volunteers for recruitment and endorsement...
purposes. Schools, in particular, provided an ideal recruiting ground for volunteers and user groups, as one NGO official in south Kosovo explained:

Mainly we get them [programme participants] from the school and we ask volunteers from the Roma community to invite their neighbours. Using the school, it’s good, because there is only one school there [a south Kosovo village] for all communities, even if they work with a different system because of language … [Pointing to one volunteer] She’s still with the primary school, she’s aged 14, so she can talk to kids there to invite them along. (Nina, NGO official, south Kosovo)

Local young volunteers also engaged with families, to reassure parents regarding safety and security issues on programmes. This was particularly beneficial in post-conflict regions such as the former Yugoslavia, where large trust deficits and a lack of everyday interaction remain between the divided communities. One Albanian NGO volunteer explained how she engaged with families with respect to cross-community SDP programmes:

Maybe some fathers or parents of children have some problems, but when I go to explain, I say, “We don’t have any problems, they [children] just go to play together, they’ll just have fun. If you want to be sure, come and watch and then you’ll be sure.” (Elira, Albanian NGO volunteer, Kosovo)

However, young volunteers were often unsuccessful in persuading parents and families to allow their children, especially girls, to cross from family to NGO. In such cases, the non-adult status of the volunteer could be a factor in failing to secure the transition.

I became a coach to give back to the community, but some parents can be tough. I sometimes have to go to their homes to ask for their permission for their children to come to the field. I have to try to explain to them what we do but they can be stubborn and make it hard for us. (Kola, NGO volunteer, Rubavu)

Sometimes I try to find girls to play because usually it is all boys but girls worry about what other people think and their parent hold onto them for the home. I am nobody to them so I can’t force or change their minds, I am too small [young] to make a difference. (Joseph, NGO volunteer, Kigali)

Overall, these categorical antimonies were substantial aspects of the SDP volunteer experience in our research locations. Next, we turn to a second aspect of SDP volunteering – the structural relations of development.

The structural relations of development and SDP

A second set of antimonies encountered by SDP volunteers were the structural relations and associated politics of international development. We identified three types of antinomy within this category.

First, was the fundamental empowerment/disempowerment antinomy of SDP and the global development sector, in which volunteers were positioned effectively at the liminal centre. On the one hand, SDP programmes tended to state their commitment to community empowerment with reference to development criteria, especially the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals. For SDP volunteers, this necessitated a commitment to empowerment at personal, social, and societal levels through, for example, enhancing personal skills (e.g. decision-making, leadership) and education; assisting disadvantaged young people in their local communities; and, strengthening developmental infrastructures within their home locales.

On the other hand, most local and national volunteers in this study clearly started from structurally disempowered positions in broad geopolitical and historical terms. As noted earlier, the entire global development project has been dominated by the global North since its modern inception in the mid-twentieth century (see Rist, 2007). Today, global South communities, including volunteers, still often experience ‘development’ as an imposition that they do not control, and which encourages or requires them to deviate from established ways of life. In some of our research locations, SDP organizational structures reinforced North/South structural divisions: the leading paid officials hailed mainly from the global North; the lower-paid, often younger officials were locals and
tended to be former volunteers; and, the essential implementation labour was provided ‘free’ by young community members.

Second, volunteers operated in the liminal space between the international development and national public sectors. In the SDP locations we examined, the international development sector was an important player within the national economy and the framework of public policy and governance. For example, in Kosovo, the international community has played a critical role in post-war reconstruction, and global North ‘internationals’ working in development are prominent in the main cities. By contrast, the public sector – such as national governmental ministries, municipal mayoral offices, local authority departments, and social and welfare services – tends to be relatively small, underfunded, and often reliant on international support to deliver key services.

In our study, local and national volunteers often drew a distinction between the national public and international development sectors. In theory, local and national tiers of government have a community mandate for delivering social services; conversely, international agencies have a ‘democratic deficit’ in being unelected and unaccountable to the publics that they serve (Shaw-Bond, 2000). However, we found that SDP volunteers often took the opposite view on these different types of stakeholder.

Thus, for example, in Kosovo, SDP volunteers tended to criticize state bodies as opaque organizations, where employment and other benefits were allocated according to social ties rather than merit or need; and, state education systems were often viewed as failing to teach effectively, ‘giving out’ certificates for attendance or registration, and restricting employment in the sector to those with connections. In contrast, international SDP NGOs tended to be portrayed as relatively inclusive, transparent, and effective in teaching new skills relating, for instance, to leadership, community relations, physical fitness and education, running activities with children, and strategies for delivering development messages through sport.

Third, related to this, volunteers needed to navigate the liminal structural space between civil society (i.e. the sphere of social development) and the private sector or market (i.e. the sphere of neoliberal entrepreneurship). Neoliberal ideologies tend to posit that the private sector provides the best long-term solution to employment and wider development. Yet, in LMICs, unemployment is often very high, particularly for young people, and the private sector offers limited job prospects outside of the informal economy. Conversely, as noted above, the large international development sector may afford more opportunities.

In this specific liminal position – between market and civil society – the strategy of some volunteers was to negotiate these ambiguities through fusion, that is by bringing ‘market enterprise’ into the social development sphere. For example, some volunteers built on their education, experience and social contacts within the SDP field in order to set up their own NGOs or social enterprises; others sold their skills on a day-rate basis by acting as translators or organizers at NGO training camps or events; and, others still saw opportunities to work their way into the international development field. As Sunil, an NGO volunteer in Sri Lanka, explained to us:

My time here is because I want to get a job with the organisations who come to visit us and help us. I see people from Australia, the UK, America and France come to visit and help the organization. If I help, I can meet lots of people and make my way up.

**Social relations of volunteering**

A third set of antinomies involved the social relations of volunteering. Three types of antinomy were identified here.

First, and most extensively, volunteers had to navigate a variety of antinomies in their social relations within delivery NGOs. One issue here concerned the positions of volunteers with respect to the mission, aims, strategies, and programme planning of the SDP NGO with which they were associated. For example, some volunteers did not fully share the NGO’s commitments to specific
development goals, nor did they necessarily agree with the organization’s methods for engaging young people or implementing activities. Yet the liminal status of volunteers often functioned to undermine their scope to influence changes in these areas. They were often unlikely to be consulted by NGOs, as either community members or as agency officials. Instead, they were much more likely to undergo formal education, training, and induction into the NGO’s mission, strategies, and methods.

For the NGO, the role of volunteers in connecting the agency to local communities was also sometimes double-edged. We noted earlier the benefits, for example, in having volunteers mobilize community members to participate as user groups on programmes. Yet, in so doing some volunteers relied heavily on their own social circles of family and friends in ways that likely limited the community outreach of the NGO.

In addition, there was always the potential for volunteer contributions to be restricted or withdrawn due to a mixture of personal and social reasons, as well as general fatigue with the work. It thus became clear to us through this research that NGOs were increasingly having to navigate the complex lives of potential volunteers, as illustrated in an exchange that we witnessed between Klaus, an international NGO official from northern Europe, and Roze, a local Albanian NGO volunteer based in Kosovo:

Klaus: Look at all these young people on the streets, hanging out, drinking coffee. What are they doing? It’s Monday morning, they’re not working …

Roze: No, unemployment is very high here, especially for the young people, there are not many jobs

Klaus: They could be coming to our activities. We could give them something to do, every day, instead of drinking coffee.

Roze: Ah it’s not so easy. For that you need volunteers and they have family, school, to find jobs, they need money, they don’t have a lot of time for this.

(Fieldnotes, Pristina)

In turn, volunteers with backgrounds as sport coaches and physical education teachers also had distinctive, liminal positions in SDP programmes. Their trained expertise was vital for implementing sport programmes and recruiting young club members, athletes, and pupils as participants. Yet we found that in some cases, these volunteers were also overly focused on doing what they know and prefer – running sport activities, developing sport skills, conducting talent identification – while underplaying or failing to teach the core developmental goals of the SDP programme among young participants. Accordingly, NGOs took different stances towards sport coach volunteers: some agencies leaned heavily on this pool of volunteers while undertaking significant educational work on programme goals; other agencies preferred not to recruit sport coaches and instead looked to volunteers in late secondary or early tertiary education, who were considered more amenable to education on NGO mission and programme goals.

A second, complex type of liminal positioning for volunteers involved their relationships with donors, particularly international funding NGOs. On the one hand, volunteers remain critical to the delivery of many SDP programmes but are also affected by sudden changes in programme resourcing or focus. On the other hand, volunteers often have little influence in these areas, as they hold marginal positions in relations between organizational stakeholders, such as the funding agencies, and SDP NGOs themselves. This marginal positioning often left volunteers to express their frustrations over the levels of support that they received, or did not receive. Such critically reflexive standpoints tended to be advanced by older, adult volunteers, who had longer engagement within the NGO:

In this Kosovo, where we live, the first time that [the programme] was running, the kids from all ethnicities were there. For the first time after the [Kosovo civil] war, for the first time the kids from all ethnicities were gathered together and having fun, and from that time they [the central NGO] promised that they are going to support this
But I’m afraid now, about how everybody forgot that. And now, because of us, as we are so enthusiastic for this, and we sacrifice our time and our families, I fear that this programme would not happen if we were not here. I think we’re forgotten or maybe somebody has rejected us. Regarding the people who live in Kosovo, he’s an Albanian, I’m a Serbian, there is no problem between us. But people who run the NGO have forgotten that we exist. (Bogdan, Serbian volunteer and NGO coordinator, Kosovo)

Third, the double-edged positioning of volunteers in the SDP sector was further confirmed through their ambiguous impacts on the sustainability of programmes. While attending to sustainability in any complete sense is beyond the scope of this paper, we would note here that it is a perennial, vital issue that faces SDP organizations and programmes, and which encapsulates the chronic resource pressures endured by the sector as a whole. Volunteers contribute crucially to the survival of programmes, primarily through their free labour and expertise, as well as through their social capital, drawing in their friends, family, and associates, as future participants and volunteers. Simply put, most SDP programmes we encountered could and would not function as they do without the contribution of volunteers. Yet, the contribution of volunteers was itself illustrative of the potential long-term unsustainability of programmes. In other words, this reliance on voluntary contributions highlighted the precarity, short-termism, and lack of sustained commitment to SDP programmes and to the wider development and sport sectors across LMICs. As Ndrita, an NGO volunteer and coordinator in Kosovo, commented to us:

In this country, we have a lot of people who are paid and live from sports, but the other part, in fact 90% or 95% people, are volunteers. If 90-95% are volunteers in a country, of course you will have a lot of problems, because we don’t have professional sport: with 90-95% volunteers we have amateur sport. We don’t have sustainable projects, we have ‘fast food’ projects.

Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, we have sought to advance understandings of the contemporary SDP sector through a systematic examination of the antinomies and liminality of volunteering specifically within LMICs. Our analysis spotlights three sets of antinomies, each harbouring several types of liminality encountered by volunteers. First, categorical antinomies relate to the positioning of volunteers in terms of socio-demography, status within NGOs, and standing between NGOs and communities. Second, structural antinomies of volunteers relate to the empowering/disempowering aspects of development, positioning between the international development and national public sectors, and standing between civil society and the private sector. Third, the social antinomies of volunteering centre on relations with the development NGO, links to donors, and volunteer positions in regard to programme sustainability.

We suggest that these sets of volunteer antinomies, and their constituent parts, may be useful in future social science research. In particular, these systematic findings may offer an analytical framework for future research into volunteering in other SDP locations, in other fields of sport, and/or in other social or development sectors, such as education, community and youth work, and leisure and recreation.

The results also have important implications for current understandings of volunteering and the SDP sector, respectively. First and foremost, some of the liminal aspects of volunteering lead to positive developmental and experiential results, both for volunteers themselves and the NGOs they serve. Volunteers provide NGOs with a vital social bridge into local communities for building rapport with parents, guardians, and peer networks, and for recruiting programme participants. For volunteers, involvement with NGOs helps their leadership with peer groups (particularly slightly younger people) within the programme and potentially beyond. Additionally, volunteers in our study noted the social and pedagogical benefits of working with SDP organizations, sometimes in contrast to their other educational experiences and opportunities. Indeed, in some cases, after gaining significant experience, and acquiring sufficient social capital within the SDP sector,
volunteers were able to advance their leadership roles or even establish their own NGOs and lead and implement their own programmes.

That said, this study also shows that aspects of the volunteering role within the SDP sector serve to reproduce or to complexify the social antinomies of young people who participate as volunteers. Thus, for some young people, many of whom already have a liminal life-course status between adolescence and adulthood, entry into volunteering brings further antinomies, for example in their positions and relations with their local communities and other, external organizations such as SDP NGO, donors, and governmental agencies. In other words, volunteering does not necessarily offer a clear and defined path out of adolescence and dependence, nor does it offer a panacea for the challenges of SDP policy and practice. Our study, therefore, makes a strong case for the need to understand and appreciate the tensions experienced by volunteers working in the SDP sector.

At the same time, in confronting the antinomies of their experiences, we found very strong degrees of critical reflexivity among many SDP volunteers. This critical reflexivity was advanced by volunteers in relation to, for example, their support for SDP programme activities in their home communities; their views on the limited capacities of volunteers to undertake SDP work; their frustrations with cuts in donor support for programmes; and, their assessments of the private, public and third sectors with respect to employment and social development. From our perspective, while SDP researchers most often focus on organizations when examining these issues, it is important to recognize volunteers as critical leaders in the SDP field. It is also reasonable to argue that the critical reflexivity of volunteers can and should be nurtured and developed as a matter of SDP policy and practice, to support their potential transition towards adulthood, and/or to support young volunteers in taking on stronger leadership roles in SDP, vis-à-vis the local community and external organizations.

While volunteers are often driven by, and attracted to, the chance to implement their sport-based knowledge through volunteering, simply ‘teaching sport’ without critical insights into the development and social change is likely to serve processes of social reproduction. Yet, the liminal position occupied by these volunteers also reduces the incentive and opportunity to engage in critical development activities that would be more in line with social change. There is a need therefore to pay closer attention to large-scale structural processes which inhibit the social mobility and capacity of volunteers.

From this, we argue that the results of this study hold both educational and policy implications for SDP. First, there is a need for organizational stakeholders within the SDP sector – such as NGOs, sport clubs and federations, governmental departments and agencies – to recognize the antinomies of volunteering, particularly the contradictions and tensions that may arise from their liminal status, which can lead volunteers to feel disempowered, dislocated, and unsupported, and to support volunteers accordingly. Specifically, and to help bridge some of the liminal gaps, NGOs and other SDP agencies with volunteers should have purposive frameworks in place to facilitate active listening to volunteers, and to create open, horizontal communication that recognizes volunteers as important stakeholders.

Second, while their activity in this area was highlighted during our research, there remains significant scope for SDP organizations to provide more direct educational work with volunteers. This educational activity might focus on a variety of themes, skills, and issues, including agency goals, strategies for engaging with potential partners, and pedagogical techniques for working with young people. However, it should certainly include recognition of the in-between status of volunteers, and examine different ways of addressing this liminal standing. For example, for volunteers aged in their late teens or twenties, this educational work might focus on managing relationships with community members, NGOs, donors, national government and development sector agencies.

Third, NGOs and the wider development sector should probe opportunities to connect to wider educational structures at community, regional, and national levels. Many local or national volunteers are pupils, students, recent leavers, or teachers within educational systems, so more assiduous partnering with schools, colleges, and other educational institutions would advance the development of volunteers. This would also help to integrate diverse types of pedagogical work – across the
educational, development, and other sectors – which is intended to produce active forms of citizenship, and effective youth leaders at local and national levels.

**Notes**

1. See https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/antinomy.
2. See https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/373rank.html#KV; Giulianotti et al. (2016).

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

**Funding**

This work was supported by Economic and Social Research Council: [grant number ES/L002191/1].

**ORCID**

Simon Darnell http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2742-0737

**References**

Alexander, J. (2014). *The antinomies of classical thought: Marx and durkheim*. Routledge.

Anderson, P. (2017). *The antinomies of antonio gramsci*. Verso.

Banda, D., & Holmes, M. (2017). Sport-for-development and the struggle for subaltern voices to be recognised: A response to Manley, Morgan and Atkinson. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 9(4), 723–738. https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2017.1372794

Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgement of taste*. Routledge and Kegan Paul.

Burgham, M., & Downward, P. (2005). Why volunteer, time to volunteer? A case study from swimming. *Managing Leisure*, 10(2), 79–93. https://doi.org/10.1080/13606710500146100

Coalter, F. (2013). *Sport for development*. Routledge.

Collison, H. (2016). *Youth and sport for development: The seduction of football in Liberia*. Palgrave.

Collison, H., Darnell, S., Giulianotti, R., & Howe, P. D. (Eds.). (2019). *Routledge handbook of sport for development and peace*. Routledge.

Darcy, S., Maxwell, H., Edwards, M., Onyx, J., & Sherker, S. (2017). More than a sport and volunteer organisation: Investigating social capital development in a sporting organisation. *Sport Management Review*, 17(4), 395–406. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2014.01.003

Darnell, S. C. (2010). Sport, race, and bio-politics: Encounters With difference in “sport for development and peace” internships. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 34(4), 396–417. https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723510383141

Darnell, S. C. (2012). *Sport for development and peace*. Bloomsbury.

Darnell, S. C., & Millington, R. (2019). Social justice, sport, and sociology: A position statement. *Quest (grand Rapids, Mich )*, 71(2), 175–187. https://doi.org/10.1080/0036297.2018.1545681

Davis Smith, J. (1998). *The 1997 national survey of volunteering*. Institute for Volunteering Research.

Eley, A. (2000). The ethical antinomies of postmodernity. *Sociology*, 34(2), 335–340. https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038500000213

Giulianotti, R., Coalter, F., Collison, H., & Darnell, S. C. (2019). Rethinking sportland: A new research agenda for the sport for development and peace sector. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 43(6), 411–437. https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723519867590

Giulianotti, R., Hognestad, H., & Spaaij, R. (2016). Sport for development and peace: Power, politics, and patronage. *Global Sport Management*, 1(3-4), 129–141. https://doi.org/10.1080/24704067.2016.1231926

Hartmann, D., & Kwauk, C. (2011). Sport and development: An overview, critique, and reconstruction. *Journal of Sport and Social Issues*, 35(3), 284–305. https://doi.org/10.1177/0193723511416986

Harvey, J., Lévesque, M., & Donnelly, P. (2007). Sport volunteerism and social capital. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 24(2), 206–223. https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.24.2.206
Hayton, J. W. (2016). Plotting the motivation of student volunteers in sports-based outreach work in the North East of England. *Sport Management Review*, 19(5), 563–577. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2016.06.004

Hayton, J. W. (2017). "They need to learn to take it on the chin": Exploring the emotional labour of student volunteers in a sports-based outreach project in the North East of England. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 34(2), 136–147. https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.2016-0098

Holdsworth, C., & Quinn, J. (2012). The epistemological challenge of higher education student volunteering: "reproductive" or "deconstructive" volunteering? *Antipode*, 44(2), 386–405. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.2011.00844.x

Kant, I. (1781). *Critique of pure reason*. Penguin.

Kay, T., & Bradbury, S. (2009). Youth sport volunteering: Developing social capital? *Sport, Education and Society*, 14(1), 121–140. https://doi.org/10.1080/13573320802615288

Lucas, R., & Jeanes, R. (2020). Ethnographic reflections of the role of global North volunteers in sport-for-development. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 55(7), 953–974. https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690219854650

Manley, A., Morgan, H., & Atkinson, J. (2016). 'Mzungu!': Implications of identity, role formation and programme delivery in the sport for development movement. *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 8(3), 383–402. https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2014.962072

McCole, J. J. (1993). *Walter benjamin and the antinomies of tradition*. Cornell University Press.

Moorcraft, P. (2012). Total destruction of the Tamil tigers: The rare victory of Sri Lanka's Long War. Pen & Sword Military.

Morgan, H. (2013). Sport volunteering, active citizenship and social capital enhancement: What role in the 'Big society'? *International Journal of Sport Policy and Politics*, 5(3), 381–395. https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2013.764542

Mwaanga, O., & Banda, D. (2014). A post-colonial approach to understanding sport-based empowerment of people living with HIV/AIDS (PLWHA) in Zambia: The case of the cultural philosophy of ubuntu. *Journal of Disability and Religion*, 18(2), 173–191. https://doi.org/10.1080/23312521.2014.898398

Nicholls, S., Giles, A. R., & Sethna, C. (2011). Perpetuating the 'lack of evidence/discourse' in sport for development: Privileged voices, unheard stories and subjugated knowledge. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 46(3), 249–264. https://doi.org/10.1177/1012690210378273

Peacey, J. W., Bruening, J., Lyris, A., Cohen, A., & Cunningham, G. B. (2015). Examining social capital development among volunteers of a multi-national sport-for-development event. *Journal of Sport Management*, 29(1), 27–41. https://doi.org/10.1123/JSM.2013-0325

Peacey, J. W., Lyris, A., Cohen, A., Bruening, J., & Cunningham, G. B. (2014). Exploring the motives and retention factors of sport-for-development volunteers. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, 43(6), 1052–1069. https://doi.org/10.1177/0899764013501579

Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling alone: The collapse and revival of American community*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Richards, P. (1997). Soccer and violence in war-torn Africa: Soccer and social rehabilitation in Sierra Leone. *Soccer and Violence in war-Torn Africa: Soccer and Social Rehabilitation in Sierra Leone*, 141–158.

Ringuet-Riot, C., Cuskelly, G., Auld, C., & Zakus, D. H. (2014). Volunteer roles, involvement and commitment in voluntary sport organizations: Evidence of core and peripheral volunteers. *Sport in Society*, 17(1), 116–133. https://doi.org/10.1080/19406940.2013.828902

Rist, G. (2007). Development as a buzzword. *Development in Practice*, 17(4-5), 485–491. https://doi.org/10.1080/09614520701469328

Shaw-Bond, M. (2000). The backlash against NGOs. *Prospect*, 20 April.

Smith, N. L., Cohen, A., & Pickett, A. C. (2014). Exploring the motivations and outcomes of long-term international sport-for-development volunteering for American millennials. *Journal of Sport & Tourism*, 19(3-4), 299–316. https://doi.org/10.1080/13573320.2016.1143865

Stebbins, R. A. (2000). Antinomies in volunteering – choice/obligation, leisure/work. *Society and Leisure*, 23(2), 313–324. doi:10.1080/07053436.2000.10707533

Tiessen, R. (2011). Global subjects or objects of globalization? The promotion of global citizenship in organizations offering sport for development and/or peace programs. *Third World Quarterly*, 32(3), 571–587. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2011.573946

Turner, V. (1969). Liminality and communitas. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*, 94(113), 125–130.

Ungrue, C., & Esson, J. (2017). A social negotiation of hope: Male west african youth, "waithood" and the pursuit of social becoming through football. *Boyhood Studies*, 10(1), 22–43. https://doi.org/10.3167/bhs.2017.100103

Uvin, P. (1998). *Aiding violence: The development enterprise in Rwanda*. Kumarian Press.

Van Gennep, A. (1960). *The rites of passage* (MB Vizedom & GL Caffee, trans.). University of Chicago.

Van Luijk, N., Forde, S., & Yoon, L. (2019). SDP and volunteering. In H. Collison, S. Darnell, R. Giulianotti, & P. D. Howe (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of sport for development and peace* (pp. 285–295). Routledge.

Vrasti, W. (2013). Volunteer tourism in the global south: Giving back in neoliberal times. Routledge.

Whittaker, C. G., & Holland-Smith, D. (2016). Exposing the dark side, an exploration of the influence social capital has upon parental sports volunteers. *Sport, Education and Society*, 21(3), 356–373. https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2014.923832

Wicker, P. (2017). Volunteerism and volunteer management in sport. *Sport Management Review*, 20(4), 325–337. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.smr.2017.01.001