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Viewpoint

The role of partnerships in promoting physical activity: the experience of Agita São Paulo

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ABSTRACT

Strategic partnership is a logical approach to face some of the public health problems. However, its application is somewhat more complex. In this paper our experience with three networks (Agita São Paulo, Physical Activity Network of Americas, and Agita Mundo Network) was described. In the case of Agita São Paulo even the name was a consequence of a partnership with a marketing company, and is an idiomatic expression that means much more than just to move your body. It also means to move psychologically and socially, with the concept of “active citizenship”. Among the important features of that intervention, we highlighted: (a) national and international intellectual partnership; (b) strong institutional partnerships, including government in one hand, and non-governmental and private sector in the other hand, in a so called: “two-hats approach”; (c) minimal formalization/maximal flexibility; (d) a signed letter of agreement: an active symbol of institutional commitment; (e) use the “mobile management” adaptation of the ecological model, in which attention was given to intrapersonal, social, and physical environmental factors, in a dynamic way; (f) attention to inter-sectoral as well as to intra-sectoral partners, in which creates incentives for participation of more than one representative from each sector; (g) the inclusion principle, that was not restricted to the institution, but affected the program actions, materials, and particularly the messages; (h) a high level of legitimacy of the coordination institution in the leadership; (i) special attention to improve environment supports for physical activity, such as: strategic partnerships established with the Metro System, that serves over 1 million persons/day; the Truck Drivers Radio Station; the State Secretariat of Environment, that built a walking path around its main building; the city of São Caetano do Sul, with the healthy sidewalk program; the city of Santana do Parnaíba building a walking path around the outpatients clinic, as well as the establishment of a fitness room in the basic unit of health; and Sorocaba, a city of 600,000 inhabitants, that after 4 years of the program of building walk and bike pathways, and parks, found a decrease in hospitalization of 50% by stroke, and 57% of diabetes type 2. A recent paper has shown that sedentarism has declined relatively about 70% from 2002 to 2008 in the State of Sao Paulo, and World Bank has reported that Agita represents a saving of 310 million US dollars per year in the health sector of Sao Paulo. All this scenario strongly suggests that the social issue in the developing countries facilitates the success of strategic partnerships.

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1. The role of partnerships in promoting physical activity: the experience of Agita São Paulo

When our research group decided to adopt the goal of promoting active lifestyles, strategic partnership was the natural and most important strategy in facing the challenge of promoting physical activity in a population of 40 million inhabitants, in the state of São Paulo, Brazil. In this commentary we describe our experience and lessons learned with Agita São Paulo (<http://www.agitasp.org.br/>), as well as with related efforts of the regional Physical Activity Networks of the Americas (RAFA/PANA,

<http://www.rafapana.org/>) and worldwide Agita Mundo Network (<http://www.agitamundo.org/>).

In Brazilian culture, partnership has a strong appeal. Historically, the people of our country have a high level of motivation to work together, as illustrated by our record in sports. Brazil has outstanding performance in several Olympic team sports, but much less success in individual sports. Agita São Paulo began with an unusual partnership, in that the name was a consequence of a partnership with a marketing company. It took about two years to develop the name because the two cultures of health scientists and marketers had to create a hybrid culture. Agita is an idiomatic expression that means much more than just to move your body. It also means to move psychologically and socially, with the concept of “active citizenship”.

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1.1. Intellectual partnerships

Whatever skills and experience the leader institution may have, it cannot cover all components of physical activity promotion on a large scale. Thus, the first step in organizing Agita São Paulo was to establish a deep and wide intellectual partnership. As a first step, many respected scholars from Europe, North America, and Australia were invited to visit São Paulo to share their experiences, with the purpose of building the most solid physical activity program possible. Meanwhile, the organizers visited the most important research centers in the world with the same aim.

Besides the international intellectual partnership, national professionals with high prominence in this field, representing the most important universities in Brazil, were invited to contribute to the program. These early and diverse partnerships became useful later to overcome barriers and skepticism within academic circles.

1.2. Institutional partnerships

As a second step, the establishment of strong institutional partnerships became central. In trying to overcome often unstable situations in the government sector in developing countries, it was useful to follow the so called “two-hats approach”. This means that one hat can carry the support of the governmental sector, and the other hat has the support of the non-governmental and private industry sectors.

Agita Sao Paulo, RAFA/PANA, and the Agita Mundo Network were all based upon an open structure. That means any institution can join the network anytime (Meresman et al., 2000).

All three networks followed this guideline: minimal formalization/maximal flexibility. A signed letter of agreement proved to be a simple, concrete, and effective symbol of institutional commitment. An institutional connection, instead of a personal one, permitted a more stable relationship between the program and the institutions. This approach seemed particularly relevant in developing countries with their tradition of instability.

Strategically, no financial support was requested for the establishment of the partnership, although a list of types of voluntary financial support was offered to all partners. Financial support came from three sources: Governmental Sector; Non-Governmental Sector, with direct and indirect resources; and the Private Sector, preferably called “sponsors”.

The three programs recognized the importance of inter-sectoral approaches, but on the other hand realized the value of intra-sectoral partners, which creates incentives for participation of more than one representative from each sector. Thus, when the Lions Club agreed to take part in the partnership, the Rotary Club was invited to get involved. Similarly, when the program got an agreement from General Motors, immediately Ford was invited to join the partnership. This strategy has created a healthy competition among the players within sectors, with positive outcomes to the program in general.

The inclusive invitation made by Agita São Paulo and related programs has reinforced the credibility and strength of the collaborative strategy. The inclusion principle was not restricted to the institution, but affected the program actions, materials, and particularly the messages. The approach to inclusion emphasizes ethical principles, that are of utmost importance for collaboration work. According to one partner, “the ethics of inclusion were central in this partnership” (Meresman et al., 2000). The inclusion principle however did not imply the admission of any institution. Special restrictions were observed in regards to tobacco, weapons, and alcohol industries.

A high level of legitimacy in the leadership brings high credibility to the entire partnership and invitations to join. The leadership of our CELAFISCS research group that sponsors Agita São Paulo, and of the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention that sponsors RAFA/PANA, represented many years of research on the interface of physical activity and health. The reputation and credibility of the leadership group seems to inspire professional, institutional, and personal commitment to the partnership and program goals. Credibility based on accomplishments was particularly important in the initial phase, permitting us to avoid skepticism or low credibility that are common with those working with the public sector, especially in developing countries.

1.3. Partnerships to create activity-supportive environments

Of particular relevance to this special issue of *Health and Place*, in Agita São Paulo special attention was given to improving environmental supports for physical activity. Strategic partnerships were established with the Sao Paulo Company of Metropolitan Transport, the Metro System that serves over 1 million persons/day; the Truck Drivers Radio Station, with a radio program that encourages exercise in this sedentary occupational group; and the State Secretariat of Environment, that built a walking path around its main building.

In the city of São Caetano do Sul, a healthy sidewalk program has changed the community profile, facilitating walking among the population, particularly the elderly. The city of Santana do Parnaíba has inspired other cities by building a walking path around the outpatient clinic, as well as the establishment of a fitness room in the clinic, as part of the services offered to the community.

Sorocaba, a city of 6,00,000 inhabitants, has adopted physical activity as part of its governmental plan, building several walking paths, as well as excellent parks and recreation facilities. After 4 years of the program, an evaluation found a decrease in hospitalization of 50% for stroke and 57% for type 2 diabetes (Lobo, 2005).

A recent paper showed that sedentarism declined relatively about 70% from 2002 to 2008 in the State of Sao Paulo (Matsudo et al., 2010). The World Bank reported that Agita represents a saving of 310 million US dollars per year in the health sector of Sao Paulo (World Bank, 2005). These evaluations suggest that physical activity promotion can be successfully integrated in the social issue in developing countries and can achieve built environment changes. Strategic partnerships have been essential to the success of Agita Sao Paulo and to the ongoing work of the regional RAFA/PANA network and the global Agita Mundo network.

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