

# Sport in the service of international development

**Tess Kay considers what sports-based interventions to promote change, development and peace have to learn from the wider field of international development**

In 2005 Nelson Mandela made a pronouncement which quickly achieved iconic status in sport, 'sport has the power to change the world, the power to inspire, the power to unite people in a way that little else can. Sport can create hope ... It is an instrument for peace'. For many these words became an incontrovertible justification for the use of sport to promote international development and peace. In the period since, sport has increasingly been used to address some of the most acute social and economic development problems in some of the poorest countries in the world. It has been formally recognised by the United Nations as a contributor to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and major funders such as the United National Children's Fund (UNICEF) and the International Olympics Committee (IOC) are involved in a growing number of large-scale international formalised sports programmes world-wide.

It has been estimated that the number of known sport for development providers and projects rose by more than 600 per cent in five years, from around 200 per cent in 2005 to over 1500 per cent by 2009 (Lyras et al., 2009), and growth has continued apace since. Examples include the United Nation's declaration of 2005 as the

International Year of Education and Sport; the work of the international organisation Right to Play, based in Toronto and operating in multiple countries; and programmes such as International Inspiration, the UK's 2012 Olympic legacy programme supported by a partnership of UK Sport, UNICEF and British Council, and delivered in 20 countries.

## **Sophisticated PR machines**

Yet these highly visible sport projects led by international organisations with their sophisticated PR machines form only part of the picture. In addition, there is much locally-initiated sport which goes undocumented. An extensive array of sport activity is provided by indigenous community groups, schools and other agencies – organisations which have chosen to use sport because they find it an effective method of promoting youth development in their communities. While the use of sport in development has gained enormous impetus from the international 'sport for development and peace' (SDP) movement during the last decade, it also has earlier and more local roots.

The current sport in development landscape is therefore continually evolving as internal and external interests, current policies and prior histories all combine. In many low-income countries sport has been

enthusiastically embraced at all levels of policymaking and community life as a tool to address disadvantage. But the sheer energy, commitment and profile of the sport establishment cannot disguise the fact that in the supremely challenging policy area of international development, sport is a newcomer. After advocating powerfully for its inclusion, sport now needs to look to international development expertise to learn how to operate in this field.

## **International development and sport**

Research funding within sport has so far been too limited to support the type of long-term, in-depth study needed to understand whether sport can contribute to social change and have long term social impact. Many of the goals of international development require the transformation of power relations at multiple levels: for example, gender empowerment involves changes at structural and institutional levels, as well as for the individual. If changes only take place at the individual level without corresponding collective and structural change, they may in fact do more harm than good. In some cases this may even lead to resistance and backlash, as in Schuler and Hashemi's (1998) study of a local gender empowerment project in rural Bangladesh. One man in the study explained that 'our wives would not be beaten so much if they were obedient and followed our orders, but women do not listen to us and so they get beaten often'. Examples such as this illustrate why expert knowledge from within development is needed to ensure that sport justifies its incorporation in international development.

The most important principle for sport to embrace is that contemporary international development is based on an ideology of collaboration and partnership. This perspective prioritises local interests, influence and knowledge and is a significant shift from traditional views of development as a one-way 'donor-recipient' transfer of expertise and knowledge. As part of this, contemporary development policies

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also focus on investment in human resources and nurturing productive social relationships. Sport fits very closely with this agenda, as it has long been regarded as a vehicle for promoting personal development and desirable social outcomes.

### Challenges and opportunities

The argument that successful development programmes require an ideology of partnership is widely familiar in sport. There are however, challenges in translating intent into practice. The experience in international development indicates that the important considerations for sport are:

- Ensuring that partnership is developed at the planning stages of projects prior to delivery, as close as possible to the 'blank sheet' stage of programme design: partnership is not achieved by recruiting in-country partners to programmes that have been initiated and designed by donors and therefore risk being more reflective of their own agenda than those of the countries with which they intend to work. Familiarisation visits and meetings that take place when detailed project blue-prints have already been prepared fall far short of genuine two-way dialogue.
- Recognising that the most valuable forms of knowledge in development are understandings of local context, community and culture. The technical sport knowledge of in-coming experts is needed, but the success of any development programme rests on how well it matches its intended community and participants. Incoming international sport staff and volunteers will be largely devoid of this knowledge; local personnel will be steeped in it and in a position to lead development.
- Shaping programmes and initiatives according to the needs of in-country partners, not the external partners: many in sport are accustomed to talk of the 'power of sport' - rightly, because sport *is* powerful. It is important however that in their zeal, enthusiasts do not impose sport in the form with which they are familiar. Sport has universal appeal precisely because of its heterogeneity - its capacity to become what each individual and community needs. An ambitious, 'professional' looking development plan produced externally for a sports federation may have little chance of being implemented unless it is based on local preferences and interests, acknowledges likely resource constraints, and fits with related policy priorities.
- Recognising that funding does not confer ownership and control: providing financing and other resources does not entitle the donor to dictate how these should be allocated, which activities should be prioritised, or how they should be run. Local partners' leadership is particularly valuable in shaping initiatives appropriately to make them sustainable when external support is withdrawn. Sport can best serve international development by offering itself for local adaptation and adoption.
- Recognising that responsibility for democratising the relationship between in-coming staff and in-country representatives will often lie with the in-coming staff. Their role as technical experts confers status on them, which may be reinforced by cultural norms of deference to visitors and/or those considered to hold superior professional standing. 'External' staff first need to recognise for themselves that they are the less knowledgeable partners in development terms, and to then take the lead in establishing that the partnership is to be conducted on a basis of equality.

It may require deliberate actions and statements by incoming staff to overturn the perception of their own 'expert status' and to establish working practices which genuinely defer to local knowledge.

In the first decade of the twenty-first century sport has asserted how much it has to offer international development. It has established significant credibility: the 2<sup>nd</sup> International Forum for Sport Development and Peace, hosted by the IOC in Geneva in May 2011, reconfirmed the contribution of sport to the MDGs and was attended throughout by the Director General of the United Nations. But while there is evidence that sport can achieve a range of short and possibly medium-term impacts, for some individuals (for example see the Sport for Development and Peace International Working Group, 2007), it is much less certain whether these translate into long-term societal gains. Despite strong advocacy of 'the power of sport', it is unclear whether sport 'delivers'. To legitimise its status, sport has to learn from approaches in the wider field of international development to ensure its contribution matches its claims. ■

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