

Sport for development and peace: some critical notes

Jeroen Scheerder

Professor in Policy and Sociology of Sport at KU Leuven, Belgium

jeroen.scheerder@kuleuven.be

"[...] sport is not an essential force for, or tool of, international development but rather a social, cultural and political phenomenon and institution with significant implications for development and peace." (Darnell, 2015: 429)

In 2003, the United Nations General Assembly confirmed the role of sport in the realization of the Millennium Development Goals: the eradication of extreme poverty and famine, the realization of education for all, the emancipation of women, the reduction of child mortality, the fight against HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases, ensuring environmental sustainability and the creation of a global network for development. More than a decade later the UN has emerged as one of the main promoters of the vision that sport is an efficient and relatively inexpensive means of combating a series of problems in developing countries. The European Parliament, also, approved a similar resolution on sport and development in 2005. Although one might not immediately think about sport as a tool for development, the practice in which sport is used as an instrument to pursue development goals nowadays has an international dynamic that has increased considerably in recent years. Consequently, the expectations regarding the potential of sport in a development context are high, both in donor countries and in recipient countries.

The nature and intended aims of sports projects in developing countries are very diverse and range from social development, health promotion, conflict resolution, social inclusion, HIV/AIDS prevention, economic development to the creation of an intercultural dialogue. The existing projects are often divided into two broad categories (Coalter, 2013). In so-called 'sport plus projects', the focus is on the development of sport itself, but at the same time an attempt is made to maximize the possible positive side effects. 'Plus sport projects' are based on organizations that do not have sport as their main activity or objective, but which integrate sport activities into their broader range of development activities.

The power of sport as an instrument for development lies in its strong mobilizing capacity (Keim, 2003). Even in countries with a low level of education and a high level of illiteracy and countries where, in the course of their history, different ethnic groups have often been merged against their will, sport can be regarded as a universal language. Sport is also prominent in the media in developing countries, where for example significantly less attention is paid to politics and economics than to sport (Keim, 2006). For a large part of the population, sport is an integral and prominent part of life, either as an active participant or as a passive spectator. A frequently cited example of this impact concerns the major role that sport has played in the abolition of Apartheid in South Africa.

Despite the potential of sport and the optimism regarding its applicability as a development tool, it is appropriate to formulate some reservations. The stakeholders involved should be aware of the fact that the development sector is not only a community of actors with a certain coherence, a collective agenda and a collective consciousness, but also an arena with ideological disputes, conflicts of power and struggle for the available resources (Boesenkool & van Eekeren, 2000). Van Eekeren (2006) even warns that the trend towards a highly centralized international sector of sport development with some dominant players is undesirable and can lead to a loss of dynamism that does not benefit both practice and target groups. In addition, the at times naïve discourse on sport as a panacea for a series of social problems in developing countries must be nuanced. Sport in itself is not able to offer a solution to all the shortcomings faced by the least developed countries, let alone offer 'quick fixes' for structural problems (Coalter, 2006; Keim, 2006). Only an approach where sport is combined with non-sporting components can lead to optimal results.

In order to exploit the full potential of sport for development, partnerships between traditional NGOs and new actors that have focused their activities on sports projects seem necessary. As the use of sports in development projects is still based on common sense and due to a still rather limited empirical basis, the sector of sport development is not taken seriously by many of the established actors. In addition to these problems, which can partly be attributed to the immaturity of the sports sector in the area of development, there are some obstacles that impede the optimal functioning of sport as a development tool and that are specific to the environment in which many projects take place. In most African countries

– where most sport development projects are focused – sport is not high on the policy agenda. This makes it difficult to cooperate smoothly with local authorities. The existing sport policy is in a number of cases geared towards elite sport that has to contribute to national prestige. Such a sport policy promotes the international trade in sport talent, but does not lead to the development of a sport for all provision in developing countries (Andreff, 2001). In addition to this policy deficit in many developing countries, there is often a lack of adequate sports infrastructure and institutional capacity, which also obstructs qualitative sport for all programs (Andreff, 2001; Boshof, 1997).

A healthy dose of modesty regarding the possibilities of sport development programs is appropriate. The sector of sport development does not benefit from excessive optimism and unrealistic expectations. If the right conditions are met, sport can contribute in a valuable way to development work, but sport cannot in itself offer a solution to a number of structural problems in developing countries. Chappell (1998) also rightly points out that good practices do not guarantee success in all circumstances. Passe-partout solutions do not exist. Dynamism and flexibility to adapt to new social needs and trends are indispensable, as is the urge to learn from failures. One can say that (sport) development remains an experiment with an open end.

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