

Commentary

An own goal in sport for development: Time to change the playing field

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Introduction

Sport for Development and Peace (SDP) refers to the use of sport to promote varied outcomes beyond the playing field and has been defined as ‘the intentional use of sport, physical activity and play to attain specific development objectives in low- and middle-income countries and disadvantaged communities in high-income settings.’¹ Stakeholders working in the field for the last two decades include the United Nations, the public sector, the private sector and civil society with an increasing number of SDP initiatives across the globe.

While other disciplines such as health and education have engendered a more critical perspective on the factors causing and constraining development, certain SDP programmes do exhibit an ongoing gap between evidence and practice. In the most pronounced cases this is reflected with somewhat naïve and idealistic notions of the power of sport.² Even if sport is applied in the right manner and results in the intended change, there are deeper structural issues that may negate such well-intentioned work. While a focus of many SDP organisations is to develop the individual to realise his/her capacity, there appears to be a genuine lack of initiatives that seek to challenge or reform the societal structures and conditions that caused this ‘underdevelopment’ to occur in the first place.³

Wide-ranging, almost-universal claims made by the SDP movement must therefore be treated with caution. While sport can have positive micro-level impact on individuals, this does not necessarily lead to greater outcomes in the community (meso) and society (macro). Many theorists including Darnell, Coalter, Coakley and Sugden⁴⁻⁷ contend

that the development of social capital or local co-operation cannot nullify greater macro issues, such as a lack of resources, political support and socio-economic realities. Coalter⁸ postulates a major weakness of SDP programmes is that they are “seeking to solve broad gauge problems via limited focus interventions.” A comprehensive, multi-sectoral approach is needed in the SDP sector⁹ as it tends to function outside other development sectors and the sociology of sport, failing to relate to the broader role of sport within society. For example many sport for development actors do not acknowledge the role sport may play in reinforcing gender stereotypes and rigid masculinities.

It is vital to explore the potential and impact of sport in fostering social change, including tackling deep-seated issues such as poverty and inequality. However, sport cannot solve these problems alone – such issues require improvements in other sectors such as education and health. Furthermore, as Maguire articulates,¹⁰ sport can reinforce existing inequities if it reproduces a sports-industrial complex that privileges competitive and spectator sport over community-based sport and recreation. It is therefore argued that the potential negative impact of sport must be acknowledged and a distinction drawn between elite/high performance sport and SDP initiatives.¹¹ How do different role players, including the state, private sector and civil society, play a part in an SDP movement that has only recently emerged on the global agenda and has been largely isolated from mainstream development efforts? Furthermore, scholars such as Darnell¹² have identified a range of ethical issues involved in SDP programmes which tend to use a deficit-reduction approach.

Sport and Development Outcomes

While sport evangelists proclaim sport inherently promotes social change, research has shown many factors influence whether sport leads to intended development outcomes, including the following:¹³

- Type of sport played¹⁴⁻¹⁵
- Orientations and actions of peers, parents, coaches, and administrators¹⁶
- Norms, class and culture associated with specific sports or experiences¹⁷⁻¹⁸
- Social characteristics of sport participants¹⁹⁻²⁰
- Material and cultural contexts under which participation occurs²¹⁻²⁵
- Social relationships formed through sport participation²⁶⁻²⁷
- Meanings given to sport and experiences²⁸⁻³⁰

Furthermore, the competitive nature of sport may encourage each individual to do their best but it can lead to aggression, cheating and a 'win-at-all-costs' attitude. Sport may promote physical dominance (e.g. rugby or boxing) or aggression among spectators (e.g. soccer hooliganism). As George Orwell³¹ famously said: "Serious sport has nothing to do with fair play. It is bound up with hatred, jealousy, boastfulness, disregard of all rules and sadistic pleasure in witnessing violence. In other words it is war minus the shooting." Many critics agree with Orwell and argue professional sport has become another distorted institution of capitalism, serving the needs of big business and elite groups. While many SDP initiatives do not encourage ultra-competitive or serious sport, it is important to note that SDP initiatives are often linked to or funded by sport organisations, which often take an 'evangelist' view of sport and tend to reinforce the structural issues described above.

The Commonwealth Advisory Body on Sport (CABOS) acknowledges this paradox stating, "There have been instances where sport has been poorly planned, overly aligned to extreme nationalist, political or economic motives or beset by doping and corruption scandals such that a negative impact on human and social development could be argued."³³ Thus, sport may work against development as may be the case with development initiatives in other sectors.

On a more fundamental level, conflict theory sees sport as reproducing inequalities and class systems, thus serving the needs of the capitalist economy.³⁴ The relationship between sport and business is epitomised in costly mega-events, which critics such as Bond³⁵ argue worsen poverty, while

research has shown mega-events tend to exacerbate inequalities in developing countries.³⁶

Feminist sources offer a different critique of sport, adopting a gender-based approach, which argues that women have been systematically devalued, exploited and oppressed through sport.³⁷ More radical researchers have positioned sports within a colonial framework. Giulianotti³⁸ asserts that in some instances, sport institutions have marginalised or even eradicated indigenous games and cultural practices, likening this to a form of "cultural genocide." Many SDP initiatives have taken deliberate steps to ensure they do not reinforce gender inequities or cultural biases (as has often been the case with traditional sport); however, the arguments above should be heeded by those working in the space.

Furthermore the dominant practice of North-driven organisations dictating the terms of sport for development to South-based communities, using a deficit-reduction model, could be interpreted as deeply paternalistic and self-serving.³⁸⁻³⁹ This argument is not specific to the SDP field and is by no means all-encompassing. Many SDP actors have challenged this unequal exchange, but it does raise the possibility that certain SDP players may be unintentionally entrenching the very problems they seek to overcome.

A New Playing Field

While acknowledging the limitations of the SDP sector is important, it is equally important to offer robust alternatives. As the overwhelming majority of SDP actors do not address structural factors, incorporating elements of a social justice approach into their work seems an appropriate place to start.⁴⁰ To date, only a limited number of critical academics, radical organisations and social movements have taken this approach, targeting issues such as corruption and governance in sport federations (FIFA is a clear and often referenced example), and harmful employment practices among sport retailers.⁴¹ However these actors remain on the periphery of SDP work and lack a coordinated approach. It is argued that mainstream players may be hesitant to adopt this approach due to concerns over funding and sustainability. Nonetheless, a strong coalition of SDP organisations that promotes 'fair play' and social justice would serve as a strength rather than a weakness and would provide space for policy and advocacy that is much needed within the field.

The author has identified another possible way in which the SDP sector can strengthen its impact.

Most organisations have a heavy programmatic focus with an aim to reach more communities with better programmes. Such a method, however, needs to be complimented by higher level policy and advocacy work. Such an approach may involve addressing social justice issues as outlined above, but also influencing policy around health (such as combatting Non Communicable Diseases) and education (sport and physical activity can play a major role in schools and have been shown to improve attendance and academic performance in certain cases). While the system of SDP may have various ethical and foundational issues as outlined above, it is vital for SDP stakeholders to work within the current system in order to improve the overall playing field. This includes lobbying for sport and SDP in particular, to be taken more seriously within the Sustainable Development Goals framework and for governments, international agencies, corporations and civil societies to engage with sport more seriously.

Furthermore, sport policy in many countries, both developed and underdeveloped, remains skewed towards elite, organised, competitive, and commercial sport, subsequently creating a double bind. Firstly, sport budgets in most countries are marginal, though sport can be used to promote important outcomes in health, education, community safety, social cohesion and so forth. Secondly, within sport budgets, disproportionate amounts are directed to high performance and elite sport and/or the staging of major events. South Africa and Brazil have among the worst income inequities in the world based on the Gini coefficient⁴² but recently directed large amounts of public funding to hosting mega-events.

It must be noted that generally SDP efforts only receive a fraction of the revenue from the globalised sport sector, and this is often used to legitimise corporate activities. Furthermore, the distribution of such resources is skewed, especially in terms of class, race, gender, (dis)ability and geography.⁴³ In South Africa, this is reflected in the clear inequities in access to sport facilities and opportunities among racial groups, between rural and urban communities, formal and informal settlements and males and females.⁴⁴ A clear advocacy issue could be for SDP actors to demand for greater funding to be allocated to sport overall, and based on its potential contribution to social change that a greater share of such funding goes to SDP.

This piece illustrates the need for stronger coalitions and more coordinated and informed policy and advocacy work. There is a conspicuous need for SDP to better integrate with other development sectors such as those addressing public

health, education and youth development. A strong SDP coalition could not only formulate norms and standards for programme implementation but could also generate a code of conduct covering broader issues such as funding guidelines, employment practices (especially relevant given the high number of ‘volunteers’ in SDP work) and human rights issues. Giulianotti⁴⁵ has already suggested ‘Fair Trade’ guidelines to ensure SDP products and commodities do not reinforce existing inequalities and worker exploitation. Furthermore, while securing funding is vital, particularly for civil society SDP actors, this should not be at the expense of compromising their objectives. Often the need for organisational survival seems to counteract the original intention of such organisations to do social good. Once again, this is not exclusive to the SDP sector since development practitioners need to be both principled and pragmatic.

Finally, the need for more rigorous monitoring and evaluation of SDP programmes has been made ad nauseum, but continues to hamper the sector. There remains an urgent need for research to critically examine, if and how, sport itself is fundamental to achieving development outcomes. For example, Grassroot Soccer, an NGO that uses the power of soccer to educate, inspire and mobilise youth to prevent HIV and take control of their health, recently piloted a ‘*Perceived Benefits of Soccer Scale*’, testing the assumption that soccer itself contributes to their intended outcomes.⁴⁶ Interesting baseline findings indicated that younger girls (mean age 13) showed higher perceived benefits of playing soccer than older girls (mean age 15). This in turn was associated with higher self-efficacy and gender equitable norms among the younger cohort with endline data collection still to occur.

In addition, higher-level research around SDP policies (and their relation to sport policies generally, as well as broader policies in health, education, social development, etc.) is lacking.⁴⁷ Impact of SDP is usually framed around the effectiveness of interventions, but as this editorial argues, the debate needs to delve deeper into the ways in which SDP can or cannot contribute to macro outcomes.

Conclusion

Based on the evidence to date, it appears that many SDP actors whether they are NGOs, multinationals, governments or intergovernmental organisations, often reinforce the very systemic problems that they seek to solve. Providing more locally trained coaches, more equipment and more playing fields is a necessary but certainly not sufficient solution.

Until SDP actors understand and challenge the structures and systems that (re)produce inequality, poverty, unemployment and other structural issues, they may be merely scoring their own goal in the fight for social change. Nonetheless, the potential of sport in fostering a range of development outcomes remains and there are ways in which the SDP sector can re-examine its modus operandi and strive for greater coordination, collaboration and ultimately impact. The time to change the playing field is now.

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