

DARNELL, SIMON

Durham University

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The Politics of International Sport: An investigation of the Sport for Development and Peace Movement

Project Summary

Sport and physical activity is now mobilized in programs and initiatives designed to meet international development goals, leading to a sector known as 'Sport for Development and Peace' (SDP). A number of different organizations make up this sector, including non-governmental organizations, charities, corporations, professional sports clubs, and governments. As a result, sport is formally recognized, by organizations including the United Nations, to contribute to advancing social development, particularly in Low and Middle Income Countries (LMICs).

Drawing on interviews with program officials and policy makers from across the SDP sector, this study sought to:

- Investigate the particular mandates of, and approaches to, international development taken up within SDP
- Compare and contrast these mandates against the history of international development and the different orientations to development that have taken up post World War II.

Two main conclusions can be drawn: 1/ while the SDP sector clearly represents a new incarnation of the mobilization of sport for social change, the political dimensions and implications of conceptualizing and implementing development initiatives through SDP are not new. International development is inherently political and those working in the SDP field generally recognize it as such. In fact, the political challenges of SDP map closely onto the politics of development identified within critical development scholarship over the past several decades. In particular, balancing modernization and stewardship versus self-determination remains a challenge in SDP. As a result, and 2/ the political challenges of development preclude the mere application of sport as a solution to or panacea of international development struggles. Sport is not an answer to development, though it may be part of the process of re-imagining and in some cases resisting traditional forms of international development.

Research Methods

Semi-structured interviews (n=9) were conducted with program officials and managers from SDP organizations. These included representatives from two organizations concerned with SDP advocacy and facilitation, one celebrity athlete foundation, one charitable arm of a professional sports club focused on international development and SDP, one youth sport and coaching development organization, and four SDP NGOs working in the Global South and focused on youth education and health.

Interview questions focused on policy makers' understandings of the position and role of sport-for-development and its political dimensions and challenges. While the insights collected through the interviews

do not fully capture the ongoing changes and increasing diversity of SDP, they do offer some critical insights and reflections as to the political orientation(s) of SDP.

All interviews took place between January and July 2010.

Research Results

Three themes emerged from the interviews.

First, it is reasonable to argue that traditional notions of development as a process of modernization cling to, and influence, current understandings and conceptualizations of sport-for-development within SDP, particularly because it positions SDP as a way to facilitate improvement amongst marginalized persons and populations. Despite the sustained critical perspectives that SDP stakeholders bring to bear on their work and on the sector in general, the tendency to reduce development to a process of improvement, and of securing modernity for those currently denied its benefits, remains an attractive political platform from which to mobilize sport-for-development.

Second, it therefore remains a challenge within SDP to reconcile critical and theoretical understandings of development and ways to do development differently, against the practical challenges of how to implement new approaches to development through sport. Specifically, attempts to do development differently have led SDP practitioners and champions, particularly from NGOs, to focus purposively on local ownership of development programs as a means of challenging traditional development hierarchies. This, though, produces a set of new challenges in SDP over governance, funding and monitoring and evaluation.

Third, there is evidence that some SDP practitioners are indeed working directly to protect the development novelty that sport affords. That is, for some SDP policy makers, sport is a response to the failure of dominant development orthodoxy, even though organizing it as such is very difficult to do within the political economy of development and within the pressures to effect and measure if not prove sustainable change.

Policy Implications

The first and most significant policy implication is that the political dimensions of mobilizing sport to meet development goals cannot be ignored or dismissed even in the cases where sport is a genuinely popular activity with cross cultural appeal. International development is, and will remain, fraught political territory and policy makers would do well to embrace the political dimensions of their decisions in the SDP sector and in regard to sport-for-development more generally.

Second, there is strong evidence from the field that a wide range of stakeholders in the SDP sector are interested in, and committed to, critical self-reflexion as well as innovative partnerships within the sector. That is, traditional understandings of development as the deliverance of aid to a passive third world are understood as anachronistic within the SDP sector. Policy makers have a significant opportunity then, to re-imagine their policy models and organizations in mobilizing sport to meet development goals.

Next Steps

The main next step for my research is to examine and investigate whether there are other or alternative political orientations to development (more radical, more active, more resistant) than the traditional approach which often seems to predominate within SDP. This will allow for a comparative analysis between 'sport-for-development' (as currently practiced within SDP), versus sport-for-political-activism or resistance.

Key Stakeholders and Benefits

Any organizations or groups mobilizing and/or organizing sport and physical education for purposes of development (social, community, economic, relational, etc) may benefit from the insights of this study. This may be of particular interest to those organizations that are doing this kind of work in the Global South.

- Sport for development NGOs (e.g. Right to Play, SCORE)
- Organizing bodies (e.g. United Nations Office on Sport for Development and Peace, Streetfootballworld)
- Celebrity athlete charitable foundations (Steve Nash Foundation, Roger Federer Foundation)
- Government Ministries (Sport Canada, Canadian Heritage)
- Corporate charities (Nike, adidas)