

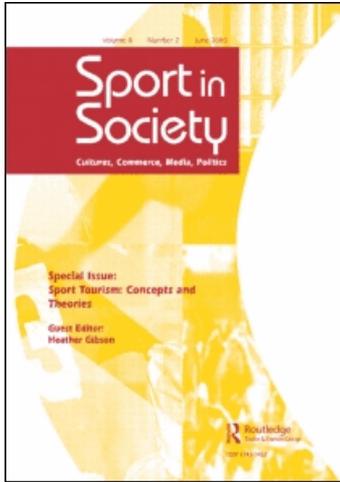
This article was downloaded by: [Spaij, Ramón]

On: 23 November 2009

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 916766759]

Publisher Routledge

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Sport in Society

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713634841>

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Online publication date: 10 November 2009

To cite this Article Spaij, Ramón(2009) 'The social impact of sport: diversities, complexities and contexts', Sport in Society, 12: 9, 1109 – 1117

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/17430430903137746

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17430430903137746>

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The social impact of sport: diversities, complexities and contexts

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There is a widespread belief that sport (broadly defined) has the power to make ‘society’ more equal, socially cohesive and peaceful. The potential of sport as a tool for development and peace is being harnessed by an ever-expanding range of organizations at local, national and international levels, engaging in ever-evolving public-private partnerships. Whether a transnational corporation committed to corporate social responsibility, an international aid organization pursuing the Millennium Development Goals or a grassroots non-governmental organization (NGO) seeking to meet the everyday needs of disadvantaged communities in the Global South, it is increasingly common to herald sport as ‘a new engine of development’¹ and social development through sport as a ‘new social movement’.² A typical statement representing the aspirations of this movement stresses how:

Through sport and physical education, individuals can experience equality, freedom and a dignifying means for empowerment, particularly for girls and women, for people with a disability, for those living in conflict areas and for people recovering from trauma.³

This heralding of sport as an agent of personal and social change has, of course, not gone unchallenged. It is by now commonplace to point to the absence of ‘hard’ evidence needed to ‘test’ whether and how sport programmes actually work, to criticize the shortcomings of ‘anecdotal evidence’, and to stress the need for better monitoring and evaluation of ‘sport-for-development’ programmes.⁴ Aside from methodological considerations, there is a danger that social development through sport is imposed on disadvantaged communities in a top-down manner, lacking community engagement and shared ownership.⁵ Instead, sport-for-development programmes should be participatory, promote self-reliance and empowerment, use indigenous understandings and knowledge, take an interest in both the means and ends of development, and be concerned with ethical and moral issues as well as practicalities.

One of the cornerstones of alternative development in the Global South, in which local NGOs play a critical role, is the belief that the state is often part of the problem and that alternative development should occur outside, and perhaps even against, the state.⁶ This alternative perspective is directly at odds with mainstream approaches to development through sport which promote ‘linked-up’ partnerships between states, international NGOs, transnational corporations and international organizations such as the United Nations, UNICEF or FIFA. For example, the Sport for Development and Peace International Working Group posits that the future of sport as an instrument for development and

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peace ultimately depends on national governments; hence the need to convince governments in both the Global North and the Global South of the potential of sport as a development tool. In practice, partnerships of this kind can be problematic, masking existing power relations between international donors, states and NGOs and creating challenges for NGOs in a context where organizations are competing for similar sources of funding.⁷

More fundamentally, this example underlines the lack of consensus surrounding what development actually means. While development can generally be taken to mean ‘the processes by which there is an attempt to improve life chances throughout the world but particularly in countries considered to be low income’,⁸ development is always contextually defined. A striking example of the use and abuse of development discourse, the Developmentalism doctrine of Soeharto’s New Order government in Indonesia, driven by a desire for economic growth and political stability, generated a growing gap between the rich and the poor as well as the suppression and destruction of certain disadvantaged communities, and became known for its corruption, collusion and nepotism.⁹ History shows that several governments put ‘development’ ahead of ‘democracy’ to the point of strengthening military regimes in order to provide the stability that is supposed to promote (economic) development.¹⁰ It is unsurprising, therefore, that experienced grassroots activists in countries such as Indonesia are very wary of attempts by government officials to co-opt their community initiatives for political purposes. In theoretical or abstract terms, the state can be as much part of the problem as the solution. In any event, the performance of the state in alleviating social inequalities is susceptible to empirical evaluation.¹¹

The above discussion raises all sorts of interesting and relevant questions regarding the rationales, design, implementation and outcomes of sport-for-development programmes. Arguably, the main limitation on producing evidence for policy-making and practice is ‘the absence of an understanding of processes and mechanisms which either produce, or are assumed to produce, particular impacts and outcomes’: what ‘works’, what processes produce these effects, for which participants, in what circumstances, and what are their limitations?¹² Several of the essays in this special issue address these questions, drawing on detailed empirical investigation of sport-for-development programmes that target a range of social change objectives, including empowerment, peer leadership, gender equity, post-disaster psychosocial intervention and community development.

Yet although the sport-for-development debate holds a prominent position in these essays, this special edition is not limited to it. In fact, my concern about the almost exclusive focus on *specifically targeted* sport programmes within policy and academic discourses on sport as an instrument for personal and social change acted as a catalyst for this particular volume. The idea that sport has certain wider social ‘functions’ beyond the game itself is of course not new; social development through sport has a long history. As Kidd notes, its aspirations can be traced back to the ‘rational recreation’ interventions in the late nineteenth century, the ‘playground’ movement of the early twentieth century, and the confessional and workers’ sports movements of the interwar period, among other antecedents.¹³ Its current manifestation is different in, among other developments, the rapid explosion of the agencies and organizations that are involved and the extent to which it has been championed by the United Nations and other significant international governing bodies.¹⁴ As part of this process, we have increasingly come to understand sport as a programme that needs to be consciously and carefully designed for social benefits to accrue. In turn, global coordination and an agreed institutional framework

are deemed necessary to enable coherent policy and the implementation of professional, well-designed programmes.¹⁵

A major limitation of this perspective on the social impact of sport is that it tends to gloss over the fact that social benefits which may accrue from sport participation cannot simply be imposed artificially by political decree or through social engineering.¹⁶ Local, autonomously run sport teams and competitions, which are primarily concerned with playing (competitive) sport and maintaining sports facilities rather than with broader social development objectives, may also generate certain social benefits, but this is not an initial incentive to compete. Most people do not engage in sport to achieve certain societal ends, but rather for enjoyment, health or to spend time with friends and family.¹⁷ As several contributions to this special edition demonstrate, such voluntary sport activities often serve as sites for the creation and maintenance of different types of capital (as well as particular forms of social inclusion and exclusion).¹⁸ This underlines Seippel's observation that social capital 'is not necessarily the result of intentional investments aimed at future benefits' but, to a large extent, 'probably the unintentional consequences of instrumental, normative and/or expressive actions.'¹⁹

But also in its more general forms sport should of course not be regarded as inherently wholesome or socially cohesive, or as exclusively or automatically generating beneficial outcomes. Change represents a process that may have positive or negative consequences, as perceived by those affected by it. Hence, sport has the potential of (simultaneously) producing both positively and negatively perceived outcomes, and it often reflects or even reinforces social inequalities. One of the major challenges scholars face, Vermeulen and Verweel argue in their essay, is to consider the social impact of sport from the perspective of socio-cultural diversity and from the perspective of localized processes of social inclusion and exclusion. From a different angle, Maguire conveys the apt metaphor of sport as a symbolic dialogue involving a dramatic representation of who we are and who we would like to be.

Levermore and Beacom identify two layers of potential exclusion within international development through sport.²⁰ The first layer relates to sports, communities and regions that currently lie outside of the parameters of the sport-for-development focus. The second layer of exclusion relates more specifically to the unequal power relations in sport. While sport can be viewed as a form of resistance that might occasionally challenge dominant systems and processes, far more prevalent is the largely one-way communication process whereby Northern governments, development agencies, foreign NGOs and sport associations provide support, information and advice and set up sport programmes in the Global South. For Levermore and Beacom, this is 'inevitably a problem that is concerning from dependency and post-colonial perspectives, especially when programs and policies are initiated with excessive influence from powerful institutions and actors'. Related to this is exclusion in terms of stereotyping and representation of the disadvantaged that takes place through the representation of sport.²¹ This form of social exclusion features prominently in Hallinan and Judd's essay on Indigenous representation in Australian football. They demonstrate how Indigenous players and their supporters are complicit in a sport system that generates a form of organizational practice that contains and stereotypes Indigenous ambition and performance to on-field involvement, representing a form of 'enlightened racism'.

This special edition of *Sport in Society* aims to highlight the diversities, complexities and contexts of the social impacts of sport. Its overall objective is to critically examine some of the ways in which sport contributes to, or inhibits, personal and social change, the directions these changes take, and the circumstances and wider social conditions in

which they occur. This volume not only explores these themes in an interdisciplinary manner, but also seeks to move beyond policy-related and practical issues concerning sport activities in general and sport-for-development programmes in particular. It also recognizes and addresses the different levels of sport – elite, sub-elite, grassroots, school sport – and their inter-relationships. We have invited authors from a variety of academic and professional backgrounds to reflect upon particular themes relating to the role and influence of sport as an agent of personal and social change. Their geographical scope ranges from small scale, localized sport practices to transnational analyses and comparisons, including countries from South Asia, the Middle East, Africa, the Caribbean, Oceania, North America and Europe. The contributions highlight the multitude of theoretical approaches, methodologies and loci that can be employed to study sport's contributions to personal and social wellbeing as well as the potentially detrimental effects of sport in that regard.

The purpose of this special edition, then, is to raise new theoretical, methodological and policy-related questions that serve to enrich and stimulate contemporary academic and policy debates on the social impact of sport. The major significance of this special edition arguably lies not so much in the answers it generates, but rather in the new questions it raises. These questions require a profound rethinking of modes of research into the social and cultural outcomes that sport produces at an individual, interpersonal, national and international level.

Overview of special issue

The 10 essays have been grouped into four broad sections in such a manner that different dimensions of the social impact of sport are addressed. Though I have organized the essays in a particular manner for the purpose of thematic structure, I acknowledge from the outset the various ways in which they cut across categorization. The essays serve as a starting point for examining the ways in which sport contributes to, or inhibits, particular social outcomes. The epilogue addresses and compares, in a concise and exploratory way, some of the main cross-cutting themes that emerge from the individual contributions as a basis for further discussion and research.

Part 1: Sport development and social change: intended and unanticipated consequences

Emphasizing the counter-intuitive and unintended effects of the growing entrenchment of Major League Baseball (MLB) in the Dominican Republic, Alan Klein argues that although it is tempting to regard MLB's increased embeddedness as a setback to Dominican baseball's structural autonomy, increased interactions of this nature can actually result in local empowerment. Interpreting this process in a uniformly negative way misses a very significant counter-result: MLB is having a positive impact on communities throughout the country and Dominicans are actually becoming more politically and economically powerful. Klein analyses the major direct and indirect economic and social consequences of MLB involvement in the Dominican Republic, including community development, social capital and economic aid. Klein's analysis confirms the point made earlier: social benefits of sport do not necessarily accrue intentionally as a result of well-designed sport-for-development programmes, but can actually emerge as unanticipated outcomes of the drive towards sustainable competitive advantage in a globalizing context. These outcomes cannot be ascribed to MLB's sense of corporate social responsibility, but should be understood as the

unforeseen consequences of its actions and the ability of Dominicans to take advantage of opportunities.

Some of the issues addressed by Klein are examined further, from a different perspective, in my essay on the social impact of sport in northwest Victoria, a predominantly rural region of Australia. The perceived significance of sport in the social life of small towns in northwest Victoria should not merely be understood as a historically evolved cultural pattern, but also within the context of relatively recent structural changes in local economies and demographics. The region has experienced profound social and economic changes in recent decades that impact not only on the general social and cultural life of small towns, but also specifically on the ways in which local residents perceive and experience sport. It is demonstrated that some of the beneficial outcomes in relation to bridging social capital and economic capital are actually unintentional consequences of the adaptive strategies of sport clubs and local residents to cope with structural changes. Population decline and technological changes, for instance, have intensified the social connections between residents of different towns, generating new relationships, forms of knowledge and economic opportunities. Voluntary community sport organizations are vital nodes in the creation and maintenance of these resourceful social networks.

Part 2: Empowerment and personal change through sport

The second part of this special edition shifts the attention more explicitly to the level of individuals. Valeria Kunz notes how sport and play are increasingly being used in psychosocial interventions targeted at children and youth. Her contribution is focused on a project in Bam, Iran, which was established after a devastating earthquake struck the city of Bam on 26 December 2003. Kunz concludes that sport and play have had a positive impact on the wellbeing and development of the participating children. But she also points out that these positively perceived effects cannot be isolated to the use of sport alone. Coaches play a crucial role in the post-disaster psychosocial rehabilitation of children and youth through sport and play. They are actively involved in relationship building, seeking to encourage young people and to open up potential personal development pathways.²²

Working on a similar terrain, Marianne Meier and Martha Saavedra explore the notion of role models as a tool within sport and development practice in Africa (particularly Zambia). They discuss how female role models might operate to increase girls' participation in sport and contribute to achieving goals set for sport and development projects, including positively altering gender roles and expectations. A major concern for Meier and Saavedra is how historical, spatial and cultural contexts affect the nature and efficacy of female role models. They explore these issues through life histories of the Zambian boxing champion Esther Phiri and the Moroccan former Olympic champion Nawal El Moutawakel.

The final essay in Part 2 draws on research undertaken in Delhi, India. Tess Kay reflects on young women's experiential accounts of sport as an agent of personal and social change. She argues that qualitative investigations may help capture the complex and multi-faceted process through which individuals experience beneficial social outcomes from sport. More fundamentally, she states that qualitative methodologies are required to help address a neglected issue within sport-for-development research: the need to subvert enduring 'colonial' power relationships. Whilst she acknowledges that qualitative methodologies do not magically transform and democratize underlying power relationships between researchers and the objects of their study, she does believe that

reflexive forms of research provide a mechanism for the expression of local understandings and knowledge that are crucial to the assessment of the social impact of sport in development contexts. This argument raises vital epistemological and methodological questions that remain seriously undervalued in the contemporary social development through sport movement.

Part 3: Sport participation, social inclusion and social change

Part 3 of this special edition focuses on the relationship between sport participation, social inclusion and social change within a range of socio-cultural settings. Reporting on sport development in South Africa, Cora Burnett argues that the multilevel manifestations of development dynamics and interrelatedness of different components of sport activities necessitate a multidisciplinary and/or integrated theoretical approach. She sets out to explore conceptual frameworks rooted in social capital theories and to reflect on three distinct development approaches: top-down, inside-up and outside-in. These frameworks and approaches are discussed in relation to four sport-for-development programmes in South Africa, which illustrate the development dynamics of such models in a context of poverty where individuals, collectives and communities have been targeted for sports-related development.

Jeroen Vermeulen and Paul Verweel present findings from studies on sport and social participation in the context of ethnic diversity in the Netherlands. They argue that sport participation can help individuals to develop competence in the sometimes subtle and situational processes of social inclusion and exclusion. Sport provides ways to be included, to attain recognition and self-esteem. They assert that while sport may make important contributions to the development of social capital in terms of useful and reciprocal relations and trust in others, bonding and bridging practices are far more complex and differentiated processes than usually assumed. The authors propose to understand bonding and bridging processes in terms of identity: participation in sport is to be regarded as identity work.

The essay by Chris Hallinan and Barry Judd moves the issue of sporting inclusion into the arena of race relations. The authors are particularly critical of White Australia's celebration of race relations progress in sport. Their essay discusses how the containment of Indigenous participation in professional Australian football is framed along common assumptions centred on biological determinism and stereotyped ideas about ambition, many of which have enjoyed currency in Australian society since the early nineteenth century. Drawing on both the evolving political-cultural context of Indigenous Australia and the contributions of Indigenous Australians to professional Australian football, Hallinan and Judd conclude that the race relations in the Australian Football League reconfirm colonialism rather than forge a situation of reconciliation, which remains far from complete.

Part 4: The impact of sport in society: historical and comparative perspectives

Part 4 takes a wider historical and comparative approach to the social impact of sport. In his comparison of the social functions of athletics in high schools in the United States and the Netherlands, Ruud Stokvis draws on the work of James Coleman (1961) and others to explore how the integrative function of athletics in US high schools contributes to the motivation of students to participate in the school system and to the prevention of students dropping out. For Stokvis, the integrative function of athletics in US high schools works

in three ways. First, students with athletic ambitions are being drawn into the school system not only to become popular at school, but also because of potential rewards. The 'no grade, no play' rule – which establishes that students are not allowed to play unless they attain a certain minimum standard necessary to complete their school year – forces them to concentrate their efforts as much on their schoolwork as on sport. Second, students with fewer athletic ambitions are drawn into the school system via activities that are associated with the athletic events. Finally, students are drawn into the school system because they identify with their school teams as fans. Through their participation as fans, students and staff acquire positive 'emotional energy' and a collective school identity.²³

Also analysing the social impact of sport from a historical-comparative perspective, Joseph Maguire argues that sport champions, as socially constructed phenomena, perform powerful functions for the societies they represent. For Maguire, sport is a modern morality play that reveals fundamental truths about individuals, their societies and their relations with others. Sport champions express myths and revered social values of a society, as well as the sports ethic that underpins involvement in sport. Maguire argues that because sports are a separate world that suspends the 'everyday world' they enable the celebration and reinforcement of shared cultural meanings that are expressed through and embodied by champions. While in 'real life' social divisions along class, gender, ethnic and religious lines interfere with, and rig, social life and its outcomes, with its champions being 'profane deceptive illusions', on the field of play sport outcomes are sacred and authentic. Maguire portrays sport champions not only as talented individuals but as modern heroes whose lives tell stories about ourselves to ourselves and to others.

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the assistance of Sean Brown, who was committed to the realization of this project from its early beginnings. I also thank the participants to the panel on 'Sport for Development and Peace' celebrated as part of the 50th Annual Convention of the International Studies Association in New York City (15–18 February 2009) for their helpful suggestions and comments.

Notes

- ¹ Levermore, 'Sport: A New Engine of Development'.
- ² Kidd, 'A New Social Movement'.
- ³ Beutler, 'Sport Serving Development and Peace', 365.
- ⁴ It is common to distinguish between 'sport development' and 'sport for development'. The former implies the development and diffusion of sport itself, whereas the latter implies using sport as a tool in development assistance and poverty reduction, for example in relation to the Millennium Development Goals. E.g. Bartlett and Straume, *Sports-for-Development Monitoring*, 10. The concept of sport within the context of sport for development tends to be broadly defined to include all types of organized physical activity that may serve as a tool for development and peace. Levermore and Beacom adopt the term 'sport-in-development' as representative of the perception that the use of sport *may* assist the international development process. They privilege this term above 'sport for development' because the latter term implies that the use of sport in the development process is an overwhelmingly positive one and tends to preclude the argument that sport might be detrimental to societies in the Global South. Whilst fully acknowledging the potentially detrimental aspects of sport, in this introduction I use the term 'sport-for-development' because it captures more fully the diversities and complexities of the social impact of sport, taking it out of the limited context of development studies and applying it to the more general notion of sport as an agent of personal and social change. Sport-for-development programmes have a wide variety of aims, objectives and methodologies, as Burnett's contribution to this volume demonstrates. Levermore and Beacom, 'Sport and Development', 9; Coalter, *Sport-in-Development*, 1; Green, 'Sport as an Agent'.

- ⁵ See also Skinner, Zakus and Cowell, 'Development through Sport', 270.
- ⁶ Rigg, *Southeast Asia*, Chap. 2.
- ⁷ E.g. Banda *et al.*, *Partnerships involving Sports-for-Development NGOs*.
- ⁸ Levermore and Beacom, 'Sport and Development', 7.
- ⁹ For an excellent analysis of Developmentalism in Indonesia and the ways in which social scientists served this ideology, see Hadiz and Dhakidae, *Social Science and Power in Indonesia*.
- ¹⁰ Kahl, *Three Latin American Sociologists*, 181.
- ¹¹ Dean, Cimadamore and Siqueira, 'Introduction', 17.
- ¹² Coalter, *A Wider Social Role for Sport*, 2–3.
- ¹³ Kidd, 'A New Social Movement', 371; see also Dunning and Waddington, 'Sport as a Drug', 355
- ¹⁴ Kidd, 'A New Social Movement', 371.
- ¹⁵ E.g. Beutler, 'Sport Serving Development and Peace', 366–7.
- ¹⁶ Cf. Hughson, Inglis and Free, *The Uses of Sport*, 68.
- ¹⁷ Spaaij and Westerbeek, 'A Healthy Active Australia?'
- ¹⁸ Several contributors address the concept of social capital. Each contributor tends to define and measure social capital in slightly different ways, underlining the broader lack of consensus in academia and policy-making concerning the conceptualization and measurement of social capital. E.g. Bailey, 'Evaluating the Relationship', 74.
- ¹⁹ Seippel, 'Sport and Social Capital', 171.
- ²⁰ Levermore and Beacom, 'Opportunities, Limitations, Questions', 253.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*, 254.
- ²² Cf. Crabbe, 'Avoiding the Numbers Game', 29–30.
- ²³ On the concept of emotional energy see Collins, *Interaction Ritual Chains*.

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