A.G.S.E.P., Sri Lanka

Nico Schulenkorf

Introduction

The Asian German Sports Exchange Programme (A.G.S.E.P.) is an NGO which has been conducting sport events and international exchanges between Sri Lankan and European sport teams since 1989. The organisation is based in Marawila, in rural western Sri Lanka, and was founded by the current CEO of the programme Dr. Dietmar Döring, who at that time was the national coach of the table tennis team of the country. Dr. Döring saw an opportunity to use sport events as an avenue to enhance tourism and the relationships between estranged ethnic communities in Sri Lanka. The philosophy of A.G.S.E.P. is that sport is an ideal way of connecting people and transcending social, cultural, ethnic and religious cleavages. Sport provides a neutral platform for all participants, who are able to experience and learn from each other in a playful and open atmosphere.

A.G.S.E.P. is headquartered in the premises of the Aquarius Resort, a sport hotel complex which was built by Dr. Döring and his partners in 1989 and is now managed and sustained by local Sri Lankan staff. Over the years, the resort grew from 12 rooms and 12 local staff members to now 40 rooms and over 40 staff. For the Aquarius Resort the close co-operation with A.G.S.E.P. guarantees a steady influx of tourists such as sport
teams and their entourage, who participate in sport exchanges and reside at the resort during their stay in Sri Lanka. International large-scale events such as football tournaments or intercultural festivals for the whole community are staged about three to four times a year, while small-scale event projects and exchanges for school children from the different areas of Sri Lanka take place on a two week basis.

Against the background of a long lasting civil war, social sport event tourism provides an innovative, sustainable form of tourism in Sri Lanka. This type of active tourism has a socio-cultural focus and combines people’s travel experiences with the emotional factor of contributing to the advancement of intercultural understanding and peace in a divided country. With their sport tourism co-operation, A.G.S.E.P. and Aquarius Resort aim to provide an opportunity for friendly competition and social approximation between international and local sport teams, and even more importantly, between local teams from the estranged ethnic communities of war-torn Sri Lanka. Whereas sport events themselves are not entirely new to tourism, A.G.S.E.P. innovatively uses friendly matches between international sport teams and the Sri Lankan ethnic teams to advance rural community development. The socio-economic benefits for the organisations and local community include the promotion of the destination and an increase in jobs and revenue. International tourists and sport clubs are attracted on a regular basis to the touristically unattractive and often neglected rural town of Marawila, and benefit from the shared experience with local clubs.
Drivers for Innovation

For more than two decades, civil war and political struggle between the Sinhalese-dominated Sri Lankan Government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (known as LTTE or Tamil Tigers) has severely hindered socio-economic development in the country. Often described as the most violent and dirty ethnic conflict of modern states, the civil war led to over 80,000 victims. The intergroup relations among Sri Lanka’s people are deeply shattered and in order to encourage socio-economic development and sustainable tourism, an active, neutral, peaceful and fun-bringing platform is needed.

Dr. Döring’s innovative idea of combining tourism with integrative sport events is strengthened by research that shows sports’ potential as a conflict reduction mechanism (Lea-Howarth 2006; Sugden 2006; Verweel and Anthonissen 2006). A.G.S.E.P. defines integrative sport events as peaceful intergroup sport encounters that popularise social values such as intercultural togetherness, respect, courage, commitment, and appreciation through active participation and exchange. Integrative sport events are planned, organised, implemented and staged in co-operation with the three major ethnic groups on the island, the Sinhalese, the Tamils, and the Muslims. These events target international sport tourists, who want to actively contribute to the peace process in Sri Lanka by participating in sport encounters.

There are three main benefits that arise from integrative social sport event tourism. First, the interaction of different people who are contributing towards the common goal of staging a successful sport event is expected to create collective feelings of passion,
unity and a sense of community. The participating groups may further gain from an increase in pride when staging successful inter-community events. Second, sport has the power to encourage activity, contribute to health and fitness, develop intercultural participation, intergroup understanding and learning, and therefore lead to overall physical, social and cultural development. Third, sport events attract international participants, who add to the international flair of the events and contribute to the socio-economic development of the local community. In this case, sport event tourists secure financial benefits *inter alia* for the hotel resort, tourism operators, local shops and businesses in rural Marawila.

**Decision Process for Implementing Progress: when and how to innovate?**

A.G.S.E.P.’s sport and social development activities can be split into two main phases. The first phase lasted from 1989 until 2002, where the international sport exchange program between Sri Lankan and European sport clubs was started and consequently advanced. The second phase started after the signing of the Cease Fire Agreement (CFA) between the Sri Lankan Government and the LTTE in 2002. Since then, A.G.S.E.P. has been focusing mainly on intra-Sri Lankan sport events.

During the first phase, an international exchange programme between Sri Lankan sport teams (mainly football, basketball, volleyball and table-tennis) out of the Government controlled western and southern parts of Sri Lanka and European clubs was established. The two foci of this programme were to provide a positive socio-cultural experience for all participants, and to advance the development of outstanding athletes
and coaches. For both the Sri Lankan and European participants the sport exchanges offered new, different and exciting cultural experiences, social opportunities with foreign people, and the chance of representing their country abroad. During their visits to Sri Lanka the European teams stayed at the Aquarius Resort. They were invited to look beyond the scope of the sport experience and combine their “beach and sport holidays” with cultural activities such as visiting historic sites and highlights of the island. These trips and activities were organised and conducted by players from the local communities and allowed local tourism providers to benefit from extra business. When performing at sport matches in Europe, the Sri Lankan teams were accommodated free of charge by host families.

The other focus of the exchange programme was on sport development and on the individual training and education of talented sports people and coaches. Selected Sri Lankan participants were invited to train with and learn from European sport experts and former professional players. The best ones were given the opportunity to train with professional teams and sign overseas contracts to further their individual careers. At the same time, Sri Lankan sport coaches, trainers and support staff were invited to attend workshops, seminars and conferences to learn from experienced European coaching experts. Theoretical knowledge was combined with practical experience to “train the trainers”. This multiplier strategy secures future support of many local sportspeople and the qualified and proficient development of individual players in Sri Lanka.
The second phase of A.G.S.E.P.’s sport and social development projects started in 2002, after the signing of the CFA between the Sri Lankan Government and the LTTE rebels. Since then, A.G.S.E.P. has been placing its focus on integrating sportspeople of Sri Lanka’s rivaling ethnic groups in sport camps, sport events and workshops to provide them with a platform to get to know and appreciate each other better. In the first years, the inter-community sport events were conducted on the Aquarius Resort premises in Marawila. Recently, exchanges with teams from all over the island have occurred, including the heavily war-affected northeastern parts of Sri Lanka. After tedious negotiations with all parties the first big success was achieved in October 2003, when in the border town Vavuniya, which separates Government and LTTE controlled areas, a ladies soccer tournament was held featuring the Sri Lankan national team, a Tamil selection, and the German club SV Herrmannstein. This sport event was the first event to be conducted in northern Sri Lanka for over 35 years and attracted more than 10,000 local and international spectators. The few remaining hotels, hostels and guest houses in the former war-zone were completely booked out for the first time in years, as tourist and visitor demand exceeded supply.

As a result of the increased demand in sporting events, local communities and workers from the area have recently constructed four multi-sport complexes on the island, where sport events are now staged at regular intervals. In all four event centres the local communities and tourism operators are managing and sustaining the site, and they are planning and organising the exchanges, events and adjunct programs for tourists and visitors. To secure long-term benefits of social sport event tourism, the Marawila
community decided to establish an International School that would focus on sport and tourism courses. The aim is to educate children from different communities in a multi-lingual, multi-ethnic context, and to provide scholarships for children from underprivileged family backgrounds. It is hoped that this purposeful education will provide the community with qualified graduates, who can contribute to the local tourism, events or sport sectors. The capital for the International School is expected to be raised from the community’s event projects, other financial and in-kind community contributions, international aid money and private donations.

Barriers to Innovation

There are many external and internal barriers for A.G.S.E.P. and the Aquarius Resort to overcome during the development and staging of intergroup sport projects. First, the frequent change of the socio-political circumstances and the varying safety and security situation in Sri Lanka are significant external barriers. The latent risk of terrorist attacks is prevalent at all times, particularly in relation to large events and sport activities staged in the war-torn northeast of Sri Lanka. The fear of attacks has further increased following the ending of the Cease Fire Agreement between the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE in January 2008. To overcome this external barrier, sport events with Tamil teams from northeastern Sri Lanka are currently only taking place in the western Sri Lankan community of Marawila – exchanges to LTTE controlled areas are avoided. The second external barrier to innovation is the lack of infrastructure in many regional parts of Sri Lanka, including the rural western town of Marawila, where A.G.S.E.P. and the Aquarius Resort are located. Streets are in bad condition, public transport is unreliable and sport
grounds are primitive by international standards. This barrier is partly overcome by the provision of two community buses that provide transport for the international visitors to the event.

Internal to the organisations, the biggest challenge for A.G.S.E.P. and Aquarius Resort is the differences in socio-cultural values and local customs such as food, nightlife and alcohol between Asian and European tourists and sport participants. For example, whereas German sport teams are used to European style food and heavy consumption of alcohol, the Sri Lankans favour rice and curry and do not always handle large amounts of alcohol well. Also, there are cultural differences in valuing competitiveness and the desire to win at A.G.S.E.P. events. European teams expect strong competition even when playing international friendly matches. Sri Lankans take part in friendly matches for social and cultural reasons and primarily to enjoy the atmosphere of the day. For them sport is the means, not the end. This becomes a serious problem when the level and strength of play is different, and European teams are not challenged enough and embarrass the Sri Lankans in soaring defeat. To deal with this problem, Sri Lankan teams are inspected by A.G.S.E.P. staff before the exchange trips were planned, to analyse and categorise their level of performance, which is then matched with suitable teams from Germany.

The second major internal challenge is that of language. While the German investor is able to communicate in English, his Sinhala is very basic and he does not have any Tamil language skills. Additionally, not all locals are capable of understanding and speaking English fluently, and some have no English skills at all. To further complicate the
problem, Sinhala and Tamil are two completely separate languages from different backgrounds, and often members of the two ethnic groups do not understand each other. The ethnic mix of staff (Sinhalese, Tamil, Muslim and European) at the Aquarius Resort is not the norm in Sri Lankan tourist companies and against the background of a long lasting civil war, ethnic prejudices, stereotypes and rivalries needed to be overcome. It took several months of continuous interaction before basic language skills were learnt and first signs of trust between all parties could be witnessed.

The Importance of Networks

Without reliable local and international networks the co-operative tourism endeavours of A.G.S.E.P. and Aquarius Resort could never be realised and the internal barriers would detract from the success of the integrative sports program. First, personal networks can establish the initial contact and co-operation between key players in the sport, event and tourism industry, with community members, representatives of clubs or associations, and government officials. Having influential people on board allows for the sharing of networks and the commencement of a multiplier effect. For example, Dr. Döring, built on existing relationships with other players in the sport business world to arrange sport exchanges between German and Sri Lankan table-tennis clubs. Once the first events were successfully staged, more and more people knew about the program and the sport resort in Sri Lanka, and consequently decided to take part in future activities. Similarly, Dr. Döring’s contacts in the government and LTTE sports council have proven to be beneficial in regards to the quick and reliable handling of visa documents for sport
exchanges, and the granting of permissions to enter the northeastern parts of Sri Lanka for intercultural sporting events.

Second, the local tourism network in and around Marawila secures community support and provides a special and authentic Sri Lankan experience to all visitors. While the sport teams are staying at the Aquarius Resort, many daily activities, outings or performances are provided by the local tourist operators, realising a win-win-win situation for the Aquarius Resort, the local businesses and the foreign tourists. Aquarius Resort can offer truly Sri Lankan products and services, the local businesses benefit from the increase in tourist demand, and the internationals profit from local know-how in their unique Sri Lankan experience.

Summary

The innovative and sustainable idea of linking community development to sport event tourism has proven to be beneficial to A.G.S.E.P., the Aquarius Resort, and the local tour operators in rural Sri Lanka. The sport exchange programme has provided more than 5000 participants with the opportunity to have a socio-cultural experience in a foreign country, and thousands of locals were given the opportunity to participate in peaceful inter-community events and exchanges on the island. In times of difficult socio-political circumstances in Sri Lanka, A.G.S.E.P. has continuously attracted international sport tourists to the Aquarius Resort and has given local businesses and communities the chance to benefit economically. Today, A.G.S.E.P. and the Aquarius Resort are successfully managed by Sri Lankan staff. The international and interethnic networks
created over the years form a great part of the overall success of the organisations, as they help to overcome internal and external barriers. In conclusion, Dr. Döring’s innovative social sport event tourism projects have been beneficial to the investors, the tourists, and the local Sri Lankan communities.

References

