

**BRIDGING THE DIVIDE:
THE ROLE OF SPORT EVENTS IN
CONTRIBUTING TO
SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT BETWEEN
DISPARATE COMMUNITIES**

NICO SCHULENKORF

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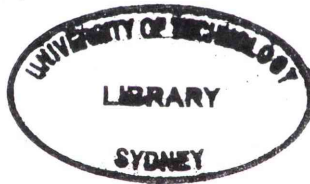
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TO A.G.S.E.P.

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PREAMBLE

Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire.

It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does.

Sport can awaken hope where there was previously only despair.

(Nelson Mandela 2000)

While peace is a policy goal that receives almost universal endorsement, it has proven to be extremely hard to achieve, even if it is understood in terms of its most limited meaning, namely the absence of war. If peace is given a broader definition, to include connotations of personal and community wellbeing as well as the absence of intergroup conflict and tension, it is an even more elusive goal. However, I believe that there is at least a fair chance for a peaceful togetherness between people of different backgrounds and possibly a stronger potential for generosity and justice in our world today. To actualise this potential, people have to actively participate, break through prescribed realities, connect with others, and dare to hope that the great diversity of human talents is capable of building the kind of communities we want to live in. Side by side with different, *positively different* people.

I could not have written this thesis if I did not believe that more and better is possible – in thinking, enacting, relating, feeling, belonging and... celebrating!

ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the role of sport events in contributing to social development between disparate communities in a developing world context. In particular, it explores the socio-cultural experiences that arise from inter-community sport events; how social identities and group categorisations are impacted; the roles and responsibilities of a change agent in facilitating community development projects; and the opportunities for sustaining and leveraging positive intergroup relations beyond events.

The thesis draws on literature from three distinct but interrelated areas: Community Participation and Social Capital, Intergroup Relations and Social Identities, and Event Management and Impacts. The sociological concepts of community participation and social capital provide key benefits for community empowerment and sustainable social development within divided societies. The social psychological study of intergroup relations forms the theoretical basis for the analysis of social identities and group categorisation processes at inter-community sport events. The research conducted on socio-cultural impacts and leveraging opportunities of sport events highlights that most existing 'evidence' of sport events' potential in uniting disparate communities is anecdotal, and that inter-community sport events in divided societies is an under-researched phenomenon.

To address this gap and understand sport events' role in community and identity building, two inter-community sport events in war-torn Sri Lanka were chosen for an in-depth investigation. Using an interpretive mode of inquiry, qualitative data was collected from disparate Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim communities

and international sportspeople through focus groups, in-depth interviews and participant observation.

The data revealed that people experience both positive and negative socio-cultural impacts at events, which influence the stock of social capital available to communities. On the positive side opportunities to socialise, interact and cooperate with 'others' contribute to cultural learning, feelings of increased comfort and trust, and the establishment of networks. On the negative side, social development can be undermined by pessimistic attitudes and management tensions. Different experiences were found to influence the way people see and categorise 'others' in group identity terms. When positive experiences dominate and social connections are enabled, the creation of multiple inclusive social identities can be achieved along national and organisational lines, common interests, and imagined factors. This supports the claim that inter-community events can contribute to inclusive social change and a sense of togetherness and belonging.

It was found that change agents are required to find the right balance between guiding sport event projects and allowing communities to engage and participate. They need to be innovative and responsible advocates for social capital and capacity building by facilitating the creation of trust and networks between local communities. Indeed, change agents are required to gradually transfer event responsibilities and control to assist the communities in developing resources and achieving local empowerment.

The findings indicate a need to focus on a strategic approach in order to generate, maximise and sustain the benefits of events. Pre event, the change agent and communities are encouraged to engage in 'bonding sessions' to get to know each other, and to decide on event leveraging strategies. During the event,

ethnically mixed team sport activities and the event-related socio-cultural experiences allow participants and spectators to achieve ‘togetherness in diversity’. Post event, a combination of community partnerships, regular sport programs and ‘highlight events’ can secure ongoing opportunities for both bonding and bridging social capital.

A framework for social inter-community event management was developed in light of this study. Its aim is to assist communities, change agents and event managers to plan for positive social outcomes and sustainable community development. Overall, this thesis provides a deeper understanding of the role of sport events in contributing to social development among disparate groups. It suggests a number of theoretical and practical implications for the management of future inter-community sport events, in respect to building social capital, achieving positive social change, and advancing local capacity building.

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