

BOOK REVIEW for *Development in Practice*  
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Book to be reviewed:

**Levermore, Roger and Aaron Beacom (eds.). *Sport and International Development*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, ISBN 978-0-230-54256-3.**

Have you read a critical book lately? If not, try *Sport and International Development* edited by Levermore and Beacom – an addition to the sparse collection of texts devoted to the topic of ‘sport-in-development’.

The objective of *Sport and International Development* as stated in the Preface, is “...to put sport-in-development on the map in the development literature, and to position it within the larger international development debates.”(p.xiii) This is a necessary aim to tackle, especially as contributions from the sport-in-development field are often blatantly uncritical, formulated by crusading advocates for sport-in-development and based on incidental proof of social change witnessed in the field. To investigate the potential and limitations of sport-in-development, should be honoured as a good approach to the topic.

To those unfamiliar with sport-in-development, *Sport and International Development* outlines the major thematic areas to which sport-in-development is usually associated: education and child & youth development, peace-building, disaster response, disability, health, economic growth, and gender. Some areas are investigated in more detail than others, but at least six out of the seven topics listed above are covered.

Sport as a tool for social change has been examined for its practical feasibility by a number of practitioners and researchers from within the sport-in-development community. The existing literature, however, often bases its argument on descriptive case studies and limits itself to the incidental proof generated by projects in the field. It lacks the backing of consistent and reliable monitoring data and does not necessarily interpret the empirical. Compounding this difficulty, many authors, academics or practitioners, stop short of asking themselves whether sport actually generates social change.

This is different in most of the articles that are included in *Sport and International Development*. Authors try – some with more, some with less success – to link the use of sport to social change and development. For the reader it is eye-opening to read arguments on the intrinsic relationship of sport-in-development to modernization and neo-liberal visions, to (neo)-colonialism and the presumably approved path of development defined by the Global North (Levermore). It is an achievement to see it made explicit that Northern sport has been and is still used as a tool of cultural hegemony, distracting communities and policy-makers from pressing development realities and diverting the marginalized from protesting against serious social and political problems. Following these arguments, one is tempted to think of the Roman poet Juvenal who stated: “give [the people] bread and circuses and they will never revolt”. References are also made to Rostow’s classical development theory (1960) in which stabilising the current political system – whether dictatorship or democracy – is the prerequisite to development, as only stable political systems facilitate security for external investment, industrialisation and economic growth. Viewing the use of sport as a development tool from these perspectives, it is not surprising that several authors in *Sport and International Development* come to the conclusion that sport-in-development does not necessarily support resistance to dominant political and economic structures nor does it focus on dismantling

unequal power relations. It is rather used as tool of “discipline” and control, to avoid subversion and resistance (Saavedra, p.130).

Luckily all contributions to *Sport and International Development* also stress the added value of sport-in-development work. Some focus more on the individuals’ growth and acquisition of physical and cognitive skills through sport programs, a surplus value that is easily recognized by advocates and critics of sport-in-development programs alike. Other contributions to the book focus on the building of and access to community structures through participation in sport programs, something that is stressed especially by those who highlight the added value of integrated sport structures in any setting, be it in the developed or developing world. Other contributions to the book focus on the establishment of enlightened citizenship through trained leadership and informed decision-making – an area where conviction stands against the often-made claim that sport-in-development has not built the necessary evidence-base for meaningful comparative analysis.

Defining sport, it is not surprising that Coalter’s much-used scheme of “sport plus” and “plus sport” is once again a guiding principle. It allows all development programs that somehow utilize sport or adapted forms of sport to be placed into the paradigm of sport-in-development, measuring them on a bi-polar scale that emphasizes either the sport or the developmental aspect of the program. Despite the flow of the scheme, which allows a multitude of programs to be categorised as sport-in-development initiatives, it is questionable whether all these sport-in-development programs can accomplish the desired additional effect of skill building or even causing behavioural change. It is a significant challenge to measure attitudinal or behavioural change and even more difficult to claim such change is sustainable, especially concerning taboo themes such as HIV/AIDS prevention and gender perceptions. Thankfully, Coalter openly voices his doubts concerning the linear development from newly developed sporting skills to reduced risk-taking in sexual behaviour and mentions the complexity of setting and the role of environmental factors to any sport-in-development program as decisive factors for success or failure of sustainable behavioural change.

Saavedra is equally cautious in her wording when claiming that “sport can mobilize resources in ways that can create change”. Driven by conviction she continues that “female sport continues to be transgressive and potentially ‘revolutionary’ [...] disrupt[ing] received notions about gender roles, and allow[ing] for new possibilities with positive spillovers from women in other social arenas” (p.136/7). To counterbalance this argument, however, she carefully outlines the necessary conditions for such fundamental change. She rightfully points out that sport-in-development projects are “hard and serious work” which require profound knowledge in at least four areas: local knowledge (including languages, culture, history and geography); knowledge of sport; knowledge of the specific development sector in which one aims to cause change (e.g. health, gender, environment, etc.); and knowledge of organisational management. Only if these prerequisites are fulfilled can sport-in-development programs really cause the desired long term effects of changing social norms and perceptions supporting the established political and economic structures.

Claiming that the required knowledge base exists in local program coordinators and peer educators, Nicholls stresses the under-representation and disempowerment of local practitioners in relevant policy-making as much as in providing the much-needed evidence-base in support of the efficacy of sport-in-development programs. She argues that peer educators have “vital contributions to make” which would make it possible “to re-imagine a vision of sport-in-development that is grounded in lived experience and not merely well intentioned but disconnected rhetoric.” In her claim she overlooks however that many of the

peers enthusiastically rolling out programs on the ground and – in most cases – ambitioned to provide quality information to fellow peers, are young, temporarily engaged in sport-in-development and lack the visionary impetus to take the undoubtedly challenging daily work to a policy level. Rightfully pointing out that sport-in-development programs are implemented “on the backs of peer educators”, Nicholls stops short in providing the necessary ideas of how to include young people in the policy creation, research development and program planning. Outlining these ideas of a genuinely participatory approach would however allow for many programs to contribute to more than just the accidental program success and would allow for a more participatory approach that gives all stakeholders more influence.

Even if some of the articles in *Sport and International Development* lack visionary ideas for sport-in-development to come of age, the book is interesting in its theory-based analysis of a highly practical development strand. *Sport and International Development* helps to look at sport-in-development from many different angles and such analysis allows the reader to continuously ask him/herself the question whether sport is an appropriate tool for social change.