

'Tennis for peace anyone?': Sport and conflict transformation

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(Paper presented at IPRA conference, Leuven, 17th July 2008)

Introduction: Peace and justice – the tensions in conflict transformation

Conflict transformation is about change, changing relationships between those who are parties to a conflict. The approach as I understand it is informed by a number of key assumptions or working hypotheses.

1) Conflict is endemic in all walks of life. There is nothing 'wrong' with conflict per se and without it there would be no change, no progress. But too often conflict is waged in such a manner as to have a destructive impact on one or more parties to the conflict.

2) Hence, the goal of conflict transformation is to transform such damaging conflict situations along constructive channels.

3) In the pursuit of change, whether it be at the level of interpersonal, inter-group or inter-state relationships, the conflict transformation approach prioritises two values – those of peace and justice. The commitment to peace prioritises the achievement of peaceful, non-violent relationships between those engaged in conflict; the commitment to justice prioritises the importance of establishing 'just relationships' between those who are party to a conflict as a necessary foundation for the enduring peace that is the goal.

4) It follows therefore that in efforts to transform certain types of conflict situations, especially asymmetric ones where the weaker parties can be deemed to be suffering from certain identifiable forms of injustice, the imperative should be to empower them in order that they might pursue their interests more effectively by non-violent means of struggle and resistance rather than by 'making peace' with their opponents/oppressors.

Herein lies the tension. For if the path to constructive conflict transformation lies through the promotion of peaceful and just relationships, then oft-times these two values do not lie easily alongside each other. The pursuit of 'just relationships' can disrupt 'peaceful relationships', whilst the pursuit of surface peace at the cost of justice can help consolidate the 'un-peaceful relationships' that underpin the surface tranquillity.

I now want to begin to explore the role of sport in relation to these twin dimensions of conflict transformation.

Sport as a medium for change: the assumptions

A friend of mine in Israel, a liberal peace-nik, laughed when I told her about my interest in exploring the relationship between sport and conflict transformation. Displaying the cynicism of the idealist she snorted that there was even 'Windsurfers for peace' in Israel, and that whenever she and her husband wanted to avoid going to a peace rally or event but would rather relax at the tennis courts, they would salve their consciences by affirming that they were playing 'tennis for peace'.

There does seem to have been a growth in the number of initiatives and projects around the world using the medium of sport to promote peace, co-existence, human rights and sustainable development. The kind of thinking informing such projects was articulated by the Norwegian minister for culture in September 2005,

'We like to see that sport is ... a tool to promote development and peace, in refugee camps, in packed urban slums, or distant villages, sport is a developer of social improvement. A movement for social change. ... We know that participating in sports can build confidence and teach life skills. ... We know that entire communities can benefit from sport initiatives. Sports movements and organisations represent opportunities for empowerment. If managed well, these movements represent a unique arena for participation and expression. And perhaps most importantly, we know that participating in sports can offer happiness and hope, even when nothing else does.'¹

These assumptions also informed a research project by the Dutch-based funding agency for women, *Mama Cash*, called 'She's into sports', which reviewed initiatives around the world that use sports to empower women and girls. The research aimed to further their understanding of the ways sports can contribute to securing women's rights and promoting social change, and was premised on the belief that 'participating in sports is healthy, fun, and, above all an excellent tool for developing self-

¹ 'New Norwegian strategy on sport & development', 21st September 2005.

confidence, allowing talents to blossom, and encouraging equality between men and women.²

An example of the manner in which sport is used as a medium by which to enhance the capacity of individuals as change agents is the work of the *Association of Kigali Women in Sports*. This NGO organises football competitions and other sporting events, trains women as coaches and carries out various conscientisation programmes aiming 'to improve women's social status through the advancement of sports as an empowerment tool for women's rights, HIV/AIDS and reproductive health.'³

Sport is also seen as a tool for character-building, especially for the disadvantaged and excluded of our societies. Thus in Burundi the Burundian Association for Sport and Culture targets football at orphans and street-kids as a 'tool to integrate them in the community',⁴ whilst in Atlanta USA there is a 'Soccer In The Streets' programme whose mission is 'To teach less advantaged kids to make positive choices in life so as to better themselves, their families and communities through soccer'.⁵

But sport is presumed to be an effective agent for change not just at the level of individuals, but also one of the best ways to promote co-existence between communities and identity groups that have been divided. One of the best known examples is the *Football for Peace* programme in Israel, funded by the British government. Its website details the programme's mission and aims:

Football for Peace (F4P), a sport-based co-existence project for Jewish and Arab children has been running in towns and villages of the Galilee region of Northern Israel since 2001. The work of F4P builds upon the experiences of South Africa and Northern Ireland in that it seeks to make grass-roots interventions into the sport culture of Israel and Palestine while at the same time making a contribution to political debates and policy development around sport in the region . Its aims are fourfold:

1. Provide opportunities for social contact across community boundaries;
2. Promote mutual understanding;

² *She Has News*, no. 2, August 2007.. The report is accessible at <http://www.mamacash.org/page.php?id=896>

³ Felicité Rwemalika, www.changemakers.net/en-us/node/2221 (15 January 2008)

⁴ Burundian Association for Sport and Culture, www.changemakers.net/en-us/node/2427 (15 January 2008)

⁵ <http://www.soccerstreets.org/> (22 February 2008)

3. Engender in participants a desire for and commitment to peaceful coexistence;
4. Enhance soccer skills and technical knowledge.⁶

A similar philosophy informed those Kenyan athletes who, in January 2008, decided to organise a peace run, 'to promote peaceful co-existence among different communities in Kenya.'⁷ In a similar initiative, World Vision in Kenya has decided to establish sports leagues as part of their long-term plan for peacebuilding and reconciliation. According to their spokesperson, 'Right now, children are hearing messages of division and conflict, and we fear seeds of discord are being planted. ... These leagues will allow tribes to come together and find common ground by participating in organized sports.'⁸

In at least one case sport has been hailed as having a central role to play in holding a country together. Thus, according to a report in *Vanity Fair*, the initiative whereby the Ivory Coast national football team played one of its African Cup of Nations qualifying matches on 3rd June 2007 in the northern centre of Bouake achieved 'what five years of combat and negotiations could not: an apparent end to Ivory Coast's civil war.'⁹ It had been Didier Drogba, one of the best strikers in the world and a charismatic national figure in Cote D'Ivoire, who had made the suggestion that the game against Madagascar should be played in the capital of the rebel north. The players in the national team came from all over Ivory Coast, and it would seem that their cooperative spirit acted as an example to the rest of the country. The 'Elephants' won 5-0, and later Drogba confessed, 'It was the best thing that's ever happened to me. It was more than soccer. To see everyone come together like that, only for a game. It shows how soccer can unite people. Sports in general can do this. Maybe only sports.'

In voicing such a view Drogba was echoing the views of another African hero-figure, Nelson Mandela, who said, '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

⁶ www.football4peace.org.uk (15 Feb 08)

⁷ M. Herborn, 'Sport offers hope for future reconciliation in Kenya', *Play the Game*, 14th January 2008. Accessed at http://www.playthegame.org/News/Up_To_Date/sport_offers_hope_for_future_reconciliation_in_Kenya_1401001.aspx.

⁸ www.worldvision.org/worldvision/pr.nsf/stable/20080212_kenya_sports_leagues?Open&lid=sports_leagues&lpos=day_txt_sports_leagues (22 February 2008)

⁹ A. Merrill, 'Best foot forward', *Vanity Fair*, July 2007. Accessed at <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2007/07/ivorycoast200707> (23 November 2007)

can awaken hope where there was previously only despair. Sport speaks to people in a language they can understand.’¹⁰

Such are the claims – it is now time to examine them in a little more detail.

Sport and conflict transformation: some questions and queries

In the remainder of this short paper I want to raise some questions about the assumptions underlying these programmes and initiatives that use sport to promote co-existence, empower individuals, and help potential deviants (particularly the young) become responsible members of their communities. I also want to begin to explore the ways in which sport has been used in the context of civilian non-violent resistance and struggle and the pursuit of justice.

Sport as a medium for education in civic values & character-building

A number of claims are made regarding the significance of sport as an agency for individual change, particularly in relation to the transmission of appropriate life-skills to people (especially marginalised young) which can enable them to integrate in with the mainstream of their society. Let me just touch on two of them.

i. Sport ‘builds character’ - participants acquire particular attributes such as confidence, capacity for teamwork etc.

Unfortunately, as Andrew Guest has observed, ‘For every sportsperson with high self-esteem, good cooperative skills, and the character of a leader, there is another sportsperson experiencing depression, dealing with accusations of selfishness, and engaging in drug use or cheating as a way of getting ahead.’¹¹ Just as sport can teach you self-confidence, participants can also learn how to (and expect to) fail. As one of my friends snarled at me as I gloated after our side had beaten his in our weekly flood-lit football game some years ago, ‘Rigby, you are a lousy loser but you are an even worse winner!’ Reminded of this another friend recalled his feelings after I had defeated him in a game of crown green bowls: ‘It wasn’t that you gloated, but that you were smug and condescending and thoroughly nauseating ... I remember it well ... I don’t think I’ve played bowls since.’

ii. Sport provides an alternative ‘outlet’ or distraction from deviant activities.

¹⁰ Nelson Mandela, speaking about the work of the Laureus Sport for Good Foundation at the inaugural awards in Monaco in 2000.

¹¹ A. Guest, ‘What exactly does sport do?’ Accessible at www.sportanddev.org/en/articles/thinking-both-critically-and-positively-about-development-through-sport/index.htm (15 November 2007)

This is the thesis that sport provides people with positive ways to spend their time which would otherwise be spent in anti-social behaviour. Undoubtedly there is some validity in this, but it is also possible to argue that the targeting of particular types of people (young inner-city dwellers for example) as needing the distraction of sport reinforces stereotypes of marginalized people as 'in need of therapeutic treatment'. As Guest has observed, 'When a child ... who already derogatively recognises him or herself as a "ghetto kid", learns that they need to be distracted so as not to commit crime, the child develops a conception of him or herself as a threat. Development through sport ideas often unintentionally, and unnecessarily reinforce that self-concept.'¹²

Sport can promote co-existence in divided societies

Can sport promote convivial relationships across the lines dividing people, communities and perhaps even countries?

Maybe in the case of Cote D'Ivoire the national football team does constitute 'the fragile glue that holds a disparate nation together'.¹³ But just as sport can unite, it can also divide, it can rekindle old rivalries, and in extreme cases can be a causal factor leading to the outbreak of bloody conflict. There was even a 'football war' between El Salvador and Honduras in 1969, so-called because the six-day war was preceded by violence at the international match between the two countries,¹⁴ whilst in Mogadishu in July 2006 militia men shut a cinema showing the German-Italy semi-final of the World Cup, provoking protests that led to the killing of two people.¹⁵

But in the context of inter-communal and interpersonal conflict situations, can sport act as a bridge to facilitate constructive encounters and communication 'across the divide'? It is obvious that the British government believes the answer is 'yes' - otherwise why devote so many resources to running football camps for Israeli-Jewish and Israeli-Arab kids in northern Israel? Such programmes are based on what can be called the 'contact hypothesis', that inter-group contact under certain circumstances and conditions can bring about attitudinal changes which can result in a reduction of tensions and the promotion of more harmonious relationships between those that have been divided. The assumption is that through contact stereotypes are

¹² Guest (ibid)

¹³ M. Gleeson, *The Independent*, 16 May 2006.

¹⁴ See R. Kaupuscinski, *The Soccer War*, London: Granta, 1990, pp. 157-184

¹⁵ Reuters Alertnet, 5 July 2006.

broken down and prejudices challenged as members of what were once viewed as anonymous homogenous categories are revealed to be identifiable human beings with their own idiosyncrasies and cross-community commonalities.

There are several problems with this assumption or working hypothesis. First of all I can vouch for the fact that contact can serve to reinforce prejudices and stereotypes rather than erode them. Secondly, there is the presumption that the attitude change achieved during the contact-situation will be generalised towards other members of the 'out-group' beyond the actual encounter. But many of us have had experience over the years of groups in Northern Ireland and elsewhere being taken on 'residential away breaks' where they mix in safe surroundings with those from across the divide, only for them to return to their own communities and be re-immersed once more in the group prejudices and taken-for-granted images of the 'other'.

Gordon Allport and others have established that mere 'contact' on its own is not enough to change attitudes. For positive change to take place four conditions are necessary.

1. Parties to the contact situation should enjoy equal status both within and outside the encounter.
2. Parties to the contact should have common goals within and outside the encounter.
3. The contact situation should involve and require inter-group cooperation rather than competition.
4. Parties to the contact should have the endorsement and active support of relevant authorities and opinion-leaders within their respective communities.¹⁶

As I review this set of conditions I am reminded of the analysis offered to me by someone with a long history of organising Israeli-Jewish/Israeli-Arab dialogue groups: 'The Israeli-Jews participate so that they can sleep at nights, the Palestinians participate so that the Israeli-Jews *cannot* sleep at nights.' Certainly in the context of the asymmetry of power and the relative marginalisation of the Arab members of Israeli society, the conditions are just not conducive to positive and enduring attitude change on the part of participants in 'co-existence through sports encounters'.¹⁷

¹⁶ See A. Evaldsson, *Grass-roots reconciliation in South Africa*, Goteborg: Goteborg University, School of Global Studies, 2007, especially pp. 60-86.

¹⁷ For a recent report see Ethan Bonner, 'For Israeli Arabs, anniversary marks 60 years of sorrow', *International Herald Tribune*, 8th May 2008.

No-one should criticise initiatives to promote co-existence through attitude change in divided societies, as long as their proponents do not claim that this is all that is needed in order to heal the fractures. One of the many tools we have acquired from Johan Galtung has been the A-B-C (attitude - behaviour - context) triangle. It reminds us that to focus solely on promoting attitude change without addressing the need for appropriate transformation in the structural/institutional context and associated patterns of behaviour between the conflicting parties is the imbalanced approach of the 'A-fundamentalist' who seeks pacification rather than a just peace.

Sport in the pursuit of justice

It has been quite common throughout recent history for oppressive regimes to use sport as a means of maintaining their dominance, both as a means of diverting critical attention away from the regime as part of their strategy for holding onto power, or as a means of glorifying the regime through the reflected glory of sporting prowess and victory. The Nazis used the 1936 Olympics in Berlin as a means of promoting national socialism. When Brazil won the World Cup in Mexico in 1970 the military regime could bask in the reflected glory, as could the Argentinean junta after the national team won the 1978 World Cup.¹⁸

But if such examples illustrate the manner in which sport can be a medium for division and oppression, there are also many cases when sport has been used for emancipatory purposes.

Resistance under occupation

In Norway in the Second World War the German occupiers dissolved all the national and local sports associations and established their own. The Norwegians boycotted these completely and throughout the period of the occupation no formal sports events took place under the aegis of the imposed authorities. In such a way the Norwegians sought to undermine the legitimacy of the occupying regime that had been imposed on them by force of arms. In his study of civilian resistance in the Second World War Jacques Semelin emphasised that 'The founding act of a

¹⁸ The origin of the *Tour de France* was rooted in the nationalism and militarism of pre-First World War France. It was intended to be a proving ground for French heroes and a celebration of the grandeur of France. See R. Holt et al, eds., *European Heroes: Myth, Identity, Sport*, London: Frank Cass, 1996, p.7.

resistance process against an occupation is basically an affirmation of the superiority of the de jure authority over the de facto one.’¹⁹

One of the most recent examples of a sustained civilian resistance movement against occupation was that by the Kosovar Albanians in the 1990s. In his book *Civil Resistance in Kosovo*, Howard Clark has detailed how Albanian villages gave their football teams names such as such *Durim* (Endurance) and *Qendresa* (Standing firm)²⁰. For the Kosovans keeping alive their artistic and sporting life was itself a form of resistance. The regime had cleansed Albanians from employment in state cultural and sporting institutions, with all but three of the 112 Albanians working in sports facilities losing their jobs. Undeterred they set up their own parallel football league, although they were banned from using publicly-owned pitches - but the league continued in the face of regular police harassment.

Indoor sports faced less disruption. According to Clark the Kosovo Karate Association was particularly successful. The sport could be practised in small private venues, and also was a means for Kosovo Albanians to participate in international competitions. At a Budapest youth tournament the Kosovo girls gained three medals - and were able to remind other countries of Kosovo's existence and raise its profile.²¹

Sport and conflict transformation: The challenge

Where does this leave us? Sport is popular and it can touch and move people in ways that continue to surprise and amaze those impoverished people who are immune to its appeal. But it is not a ‘force for good’ anymore than it is a ‘force for evil’. The challenge for theorists and practitioners is of course to identify those conditions which enhance the potential for constructive change that can be channelled through sports activities wherever and whenever they take place.

¹⁹ J. Semelin, *Unarmed Against Hitler: Civilian resistance in Europe 1939-43*, London: Praeger, 1993, p. 48. Semelin defined civilian resistance as ‘all kinds of opposition to the occupier and/or collaborators that are practised without weapons’.

²⁰ H. Clark, *Civilian Resistance in Kosovo*, London: Pluto, pp. 46-7.

²¹ Clark, p. 111. Other instances where sports occasions have been used to protest against ‘occupation’ include the so-called ‘Blood in the water polo match’ between Hungary and the USSR at the 1956 Olympics and the so-called ‘Czechoslovak Hockey Riots’ of 1969 when the Czechoslovakian ice-hockey team defeated the Soviet team at the world championships in Stockholm, the year after the squashing of the ‘Prague Spring.’