

Sport for development, a level playing field? A volunteer experience.

The experience of going to volunteer for one year in Uganda with a sport Non Governmental Organisation (NGO) gave me an insight into all the skills I have to offer and positive things I can contribute, it also showed me the vast inequalities that exist in the world and led me to question do sport for development programs always best serve the people who are its recipients?

Before arriving in Kampala, the capital of Uganda, to start my year long volunteering experience with a local sport for development NGO I had only a few reference points for what Africa and Uganda was going to be like. These reference points were a short module in my secondary school Geography class about developing countries and their demographics and a series of fundraising campaigns for aid programs to assist those in developing countries including; Live Aid, Comic Relief and various Oxfam promotions.

So strong, monolithic and simple where the images and messages portrayed by these aid campaigns it seemed like the whole of Africa may need helping as it didn't seem to be able to help itself. Could this be true I thought to myself?

Yes it is true... if you believe that Africa is a 'hopeless' place and can only be 'saved' by individuals and organisations that reside in the West.

However, overwhelmingly, the answer is no if one takes the opportunity to live and work in a city such as Kampala. My accommodation was in a student hostel that provided accommodation for the thousands of students attending Makerere University.

The area is jam packed with entrepreneurs whose businesses provide a multitude of goods and services to the area. This, of course was a bit of shock to me, I had not expected people in Uganda to seem so capable, as on a series of adverts shown in the UK by a large charity I was told that by donating money to the charity they would teach people how to fish and farm, in order to feed themselves.

Inequality

Despite this new dynamic, capable version of Uganda being presented to me I knew that there was a gap between me and many of the Ugandans I came into contact with and that it would be difficult, perhaps impossible, to traverse the inequality in our relative global societal positions.

During the second part of my volunteering year I was asked, by the NGO I was working for, to go to a district of Uganda which had been affected by various conflicts over the previous 25 years to kick start a health and education based sports program for young people.

When I first started working in the district, running the program I was excited and honoured to be entrusted with such responsibility. I really hoped that I could lay the foundations for a lasting legacy that would change things for the better.

Yet, there was an uncomfortable idea in my head that was becoming more pervasive as the program wore on. The idea; there was a fundamental divide between me and the Ugandan volunteers, not in what we wanted to achieve but in our positions in the world and what was available to us as a result of our respective positions.

Divide

The sense of divide between me and the other volunteers from the district was brought home to me on a Saturday afternoon on which the final set of league games of our first season

were being played. Due to an error I made, in a letter sent to 20 or so coaches, there was a belief among them they were to get an additional amount of money at the end of the season, on top of money they had received weekly, as part of their transport reimbursement.

The mistake, however, was only realised towards the end of the final day of league games and left me in a situation of having to tell the coaches they were not going to get the money they thought they would get.

The reaction I received from the coaches, when I informed them, was one of revolt bordering on aggression.

“Corruption,” shouted someone, I span around to see a 15 years old boy known to me. Another said, “I was cock-sure we were going to get that money at the end of the season.” A mood of mutiny descended over the situation, which they knew, I knew was critical given that the donors were present at the occasion.

I knew I could not give them the money there and then because firstly I was not sure if I was allowed to give the money out (as per my budget and donor our NGO’s donor agreement), secondly I did not want to set a precedence for handing out lump sums of money for what was supposed to be a voluntary position and thirdly I didn’t have the amount of money needed to give to everyone with me.

Only some careful words, including admitting my mistake and a promise of a meeting to sort the problem out calmed the situation and averted what would have been an embarrassing moment in front of the donors. It did, however, give a sour end to what as a great closing day to the league program.

Reflections

What was highlighted to me through this incident was that we as volunteers were not in equal or similar position. I realised how I did not need to think about receiving a transport refund as I knew that someone would be able to support me financially if I had a real problem, my NGO, the gap year organisation, my friends at home and of course my parents.

In the end, I am glad to say we were able to give the coaches some extra financial support to cover costs they incurred throughout the season. Yet, this is not the point. The point is that I was coming from a completely different position to the people who lived in that part of Uganda. I am certain that a lot of the people I was working with or the children the program was designed for lived in what many would identify as poverty.

This raised further questions in my own head about how the program was using sport to encourage children to attend an education system that is free. I thought to my self then and still do now: “Why aren’t all the children taking part in this free education system?”

It seemed like, at times, the sport for development program I was running was missing the point of why this might be happening: economic and political inequality in the world.

My experience as a volunteer brought home to me the level of inequality between my home in the UK and in Uganda, what I saw was a programme that was trying to do something good but felt at times like an apology for a global system that sees people in countries like Uganda valued in an unequal manner to those in the UK. Likewise, it seemed as though instead of addressing such issues this program and other development programs seem to tell people to change their behaviour without addressing the reason that people might find themselves in that situation in the first place.

