

## The Role of Sport Events in Peace Tourism

“...Sport is far more than a luxury or a form of entertainment. ...Access to and participation is a human right....The potential of sport as a tool for development and peace has yet to be realized...” (United Nations 2003, pp. 1-2)

This statement represents the growing interest and recognition of the important role that sport and by implication sport events can play in building peaceful communities. In divided societies sport events are being used as a strategic tool to improve intergroup relations and advance inter-community development. Sport provides a neutral platform for participants of all backgrounds, who are able to experience and learn from each other in a playful and open atmosphere. From a tourism perspective, sport events provide an opportunity for friendly competition and social approximation between international and local sportspeople, their teams and communities. Cross-cultural sport events and projects have contributed to understanding and ‘normalising’ in societies as deeply divided as Israel (Stidder and Haasner 2007; Sugden 2006), Sri Lanka (Schulenkorf 2005), Bosnia / Herzegovina (Gasser and Levinsen 2004), South Africa (Guelke and Sugden 2000) and Northern Ireland (Bairner and Darby 2000). At the same time, sport events attract national and international tourists, who add to the special flair of the events and contribute to the socio-economic development of the local community.

The inclusive and celebrative leisure atmosphere prevailing at sports events is considered a promising way of connecting people and transcending social, cultural, ethnic and religious cleavages. Sport events are seen as important contributors to the social fabric of multicultural societies as they can increase community spirit and pride, enhance cultural traditions, develop identity, values, and self esteem and promise to add to the improvement of general living conditions in communities in the long run (Stidder and Haasner 2007; Chalip 2006; Misener and Mason 2006). It is the local people who play an important role in the staging of sport events, as they are often both host and participant. It is suggested that cooperation, leadership, and the capacity to control development can be achieved by collaboratively organising, planning and staging sport events. From a tourism point of view, participation in sport events combines people’s travel experiences with the emotional factor of contributing to the advancement of intercultural understanding and peace.

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. 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 events are considered a neutral platform for participants to experience and learn from each other in a playful and open atmosphere. 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.

Using the A.G.S.E.P as a case study this chapter will explore how sport events can be used as a catalyst for change, a positive first step, a tool for friendship and network building, for intercultural learning and appreciation, and ultimately peaceful communities.

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