

Maximising sport event benefits: Sustaining and leveraging socio-cultural impacts

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Aim of paper and research questions

In an attempt to improve intergroup relations in divided societies NGOs and Government agencies have started to turn to sport events as a vehicle for reconciliation and peace (Gasser & Levinsen, 2004; Sugden, 2006). This paper investigates the role of inter-community sport events in contributing to social development between disparate ethnic communities in war-torn Sri Lanka. In particular, it examines strategies, partnerships and support programs for sustaining and leveraging event benefits for direct participants, supporting stakeholders and the wider community.

Literature review

It has been shown that community participation projects can enhance individual and collective capacities, improve efficacy, create social capital and, where poverty is implicated, promote social and economic justice and wellbeing (Nicholson & Hoye, 2008; Reid, 2006; Skinner, Zakus, & Cowell, 2008). Participation at sport events provides opportunities for people to come together to socialise and be entertained, and to develop contacts, friendships and networks. Sport events may further act as boosters for social inclusion, community development and social identity, and as such they are increasingly recognised as a national priority in many countries (Kidd, 2008; United Nations, 2006).

To maximise events' potential, event managers and researchers have recently moved beyond the planning of direct event impacts to focusing on strategic paths towards achieving lasting outcomes for host communities – a phenomenon described as event leverage (Chalip, 2004, 2006; O'Brien & Chalip, 2008). From an economic perspective, leverage strategies aim for repeat visitation to host regions, the fostering of longer-term business relationships and the encouragement of continuous trade, investment and employment. This paper addresses the area of social sustainability and investigates leveraging strategies that may facilitate intergroup development and peaceful togetherness between disparate communities in a developing world context – an area which has thus far received limited empirical research.

Research design and data analysis

Two inter-community sport events in war-torn Sri Lanka were selected for an in-depth investigation into opportunities for sustaining and leveraging social event benefits. The International Run for Peace (IR4P) and the Intercultural Sports Meeting (ISM) describe two 'sport for all' events that were supported by the Asian-German Sports Exchange Programme (A.G.S.E.P.) as an international 'change agent'. Following an interpretive mode of inquiry, qualitative data were gathered from two focus group discussions and 35 semi-structured in-

depth interviews with A.G.S.E.P. staff and different event stakeholders from Sri Lanka's disparate Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslim communities.

Results

A number of strategies and cooperation are suggested to sustain, leverage, and therefore maximise inter-community sport event benefits. On the operational level, respondents suggest to a) focus strategically on children as catalysts for change; b) increase ethnically mixed team sport activities; and c) provide event-related socio-cultural opportunities. On the strategic level, a combination of larger highlight events and regular sport-for-development programs is suggested, while a focus on social event leverage strategies are expected to generate additional political, educational, promotional and socio-economic benefits.

The government as a strategic partner could stage ancillary events such as street parades or cultural festivals that tie in with the sport event. Moreover, educational workshops on culture and language could be incorporated in the overall event design, and health campaigns could be organised around important issues such as HIV/AIDS, Hepatitis or drug use. Furthermore, schools and kindergartens could teach important socio-cultural norms and values, while school exchange programs and community partnerships may increase the likelihood of sustaining and multiplying positive social outcomes to the wider community. Finally, the media should be used to communicate an image of 'peace communities' to a wider audience. Organisers and communities could market 'peace events' through regional advertising and promotion campaigns and simultaneously encourage the media to showcase the 'peaceful host region'. After the events, the image of communities could be improved and the reputational capital of organisers increased by the media reporting on the social outcomes of events, and by reflecting on the joint community efforts in designing a peaceful and inclusive environment 'for all'.

Discussion and conclusion

The potential for sustaining, growing and leveraging social benefits needs to be seen in the context of disparate communities in a specific developing world context, as opposed to developed countries (Chalip & Leyns, 2002; Chalip & McGuirty, 2004; O'Brien, 2007). Against this background, sport event impacts can and should be sustained and leveraged to achieve additional socio-cultural, educational and promotional benefits for communities and change agents. As a catalyst or vehicle for peace and reconciliation, sport events can contribute, albeit modestly, to social development for the community at large. These findings extend the academic literature on strategic event management (Chalip, 2004, 2006; O'Brien, 2007), as they provide empirical evidence of community event leverage for social purposes.

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