

# **‘SAME SAME BUT DIFFERENT’: THE INTERGROUP IMPACTS OF A SPORTING EVENT IN SRI LANKA**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Research has shown that special events can be used as a tool for increasing community spirit, developing identity and self-esteem, enhancing cultural traditions, and contributing to skill acquisition and community learning (Misener and Mason 2006; Reid 2006; Lawson 2005). Further, studies have found that events allow for cooperation among different people which can result in building networks and empowering further community action (Gasser and Levinsen 2004). To date, investigations of the socio-cultural impacts of inter-community events have been largely overlooked (Chalip 2006). Moreover, Chalip (2006) argues that there is little research evidence to support the claim that sporting events can increase social cohesion, intergroup liking and intergroup friendship potential. Most “evidence” is based on anecdotes and symbolic gestures suggesting that sport and recreation can contribute to nation building and peace among communities.

This study explores how special events as a unique form of celebration can contribute to improving inter-community relations and advancing social development and well-being in ethnically divided societies. Sri Lanka represents a striking example of interethnic tension, as violent conflicts have been occurring over land ownership, power and status within the country for the past 24 years. The study focused on identifying and measuring the social contribution that the “1<sup>st</sup> International Run for Peace” made to the participating communities. Participants’ every day intergroup experiences were compared with their intergroup experiences during the event in order to explore if sporting events have the potential to bring communities together, modify their view of ‘rival’ ethnic groups, and impact on their social identities.

## **METHODS**

This research study employed a case study approach to examine the intergroup experiences, behaviour, and social impacts at an intercultural peace sport event and to establish whether participants’ intergroup perceptions had changed as a result of their participation in the festival. The International Run for Peace was chosen for its inter-community participation approach. A total of 150 questionnaires were completed in the presence of research assistants following the event by various stakeholders, such as participants, spectators, organisers, sponsors, media and government officials. 144 completed questionnaires were usable and analysed with SPSS.

The questionnaire consisted of nine sections, which sought both quantitative and qualitative responses designed to measure and compare community members’ perceptions of every day intergroup relations, behaviour and group identity in Sri Lanka compared with the perceptions and intergroup experiences made at the event. For this, items were drawn from several instruments in the field of event impact studies, in particular from previous research by Delamere, Wankel and Hinch (2001) and Fredline, Jago and Deery (2003). An inter-community social impact component was added for the purpose of this research.

The results and discussion that follow report the outcomes of the first two sections of the study. These are 1) self perception of intergroup attitude and behaviour in Sri Lanka and people’s motivations for participating in the event; and 2) the comparison of people’s perception of group identity and intergroup atmosphere within and without an event context.

## RESULTS

The Asian German Sports Exchange Programme (A.G.S.E.P.) organised the '1<sup>st</sup> International Run for Peace' in cooperation with members of Sri Lanka's three major ethnic groups and several international volunteers. The event was divided into a competitive 21 km half-marathon with Rs. 100,000 (A\$ 1,300) and a non-competitive 5km 'peace move', which was open to all. A total of 800 Sri Lankan and international runners took part. The multicultural character of the day is reflected in the response rates of the questionnaires: 48.6% were Sinhalese, 9.7% were Tamils, 8.3% were Muslim, 20.8% were European and 12.5% from other countries.

In response to the statement that there are friendly inter-ethnic relations on a daily basis in Sri Lanka 33.4% of all respondents disagreed. However, they agreed that more intergroup contact will enhance intergroup affective relationships (95.7%) and productivity (80.6%) among the country's ethnic communities. A large majority of people (91.6%) have the desire to build inter-ethnic friendships, and 95.7% agreed that sport activities were an enjoyable way to move towards positive interaction. Social aspects dominated people's motivations for participating in and spectating at the event. In all 20.2% wanted to support the peace process in Sri Lanka, 18.5% wanted to have a good time, 16% wanted to be with friends and 13.6% wanted to make new friends. Only 4.9% were motivated by economic factors such as the prize money.

The study found that during the event people felt more comfortable (35.2%), excited (28.2%) and trusting (35.2%) at the event, and at the same time less threatened (16.9%), annoyed (11.2%) and awkward (22.6%). Results indicate that contact and interaction at the event reduced intergroup anxiety and increased people's comfort and confidence. In response to the question how people perceive members of other ethnic groups during the event it was found in every item that people's perceptions of a common group membership increased. An inter-community peace event can therefore impact on people's social identity, and a "dual identity" situation can be created. Instead of looking at others as strangers, people are able to share a common group membership and experience the event as ONE superordinate (sports) group.

## DISCUSSION

This study found that inter-community sporting events can generate an improved atmosphere among rival ethnic groups and allow for intergroup friendships to be built. During an event people can forget about intergroup tensions and may be influenced in their way of categorising "the other" in group identity terms. A "Dual Identity" status can be achieved, which supports feelings of togetherness and shared experience. The question remains how these positive event intergroup impacts can be generalised and leveraged to address social issues, and how they can be best used to inform public policy.

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