

# SPORT EVENTS AS SYMBOLS OF HOPE AND LEVERS FOR POLITICAL CHANGE AND HUMAN RIGHTS DEVELOPMENT: A FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

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In theory, the Olympic torch relay can be a potent symbol of the virtues of sport and a representation of peace. The various attempts to disrupt the torch relay in 2008 by groups protesting about China's poor record on human rights meant that the juxtaposition of the torch relay symbolism and the cases of human rights abuses were easily drawn by the media. The tightening up of security in the later stages of the event showed images of the torch being closely accompanied by Chinese security officials clad in track suits, which only seemed to further undermine the theoretical spirit of peace and virtue. The subsequent decision by the IOC in 2009 to ban the international stages of the torch relay and for it to only take place within the host country, where there could be, according to an IOC spokesman, 'more controls' did not come as a surprise for more cynical observers, who interpreted the decision as a means to reduce the risk of the torch relay event getting mixed up in any political controversies which could damage the IOC brand and its commercial interests.

This example illustrates a common tension which can be found in many sport events. Sport events are frequently presented as a force for good, creating opportunities for change and separate from politics; yet the extent that these things are delivered can also be exposed as naively optimistic, inseparable from political processes and, at worse, can actually erode people's rights. It is this tension of the extent sport events contribute or erode human rights that is the key focus of this paper.

This paper utilises and builds upon a variety of writings on sport and human rights, such as the work of Sugden (2010), Donnelly (2008), Kidd and Donnelly (2000), Lenskyj (2006) and Giulianotti (2006). The value of these works is that they show the political nature of sport, along with illustrating the impact of sport on human rights can be decidedly mixed, whereby sport can both improve rights, or be an area of human rights abuse. The limitations of these works are that they do not develop any coherent typologies or frameworks for analysis, which can allow for a more consistent assessment of sport and sport events impact on human rights.

It is partly in response to these weaknesses that this work develops both typologies relating to sport and human rights, and a new theoretical framework for analysis, to allow for a more consistent, systematic assessment of the impact sport events can have on human rights. It has a key founding premise that sport and politics mixing is not an aberration, but a constant dynamic, for which the area of sport and human rights is of growing importance. The preliminary results are decidedly mixed, where evidence can be found to show instances where rights are improved for some, be detrimental to others, but most likely to have limited impacts for most. These findings, very importantly, also begin to open up the subject of sport events, rights and the concept of leverage, which shows that events in themselves are not necessarily sufficient to deliver positive impacts, but are dependent on the policies and strategies which 'lever' any human rights benefits into place.

## References

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