

COMMENTARY

## Ethical dimensions of the global sport for development and peace sector

SIMON DARNELL

**Abstract**

*The global sport for development and peace (SDP) sector is loosely comprised of various stakeholders that organise and advocate for the role of sport in meeting the goals of international development and peace building. The foundational claim of SDP is that when organised thoughtfully or consciously, sport programmes can make a contribution to health promotion, gender empowerment, community cohesion and conflict resolution (among other goals) on an international scale. In this paper, I highlight some key ethical issues within the SDP field, to draw attention to the ethics of organising sport for development. Control and power over underclasses, the romanticisation of sport, and the political ideology of development are all discussed. I conclude by suggesting that only through an ethical engagement with SDP are such programmes likely to succeed in achieving some sustainable, positive development outcomes. It is through self-reflection by SDP stakeholders on issues of control, mythmaking and ideology that SDP can best succeed.*

**Keywords:** sport, international development, ethics, power, control

**Introduction**

The global sport for development and peace (SDP) sector is loosely comprised of various stakeholders that organise and advocate for the role of sport in meeting the goals of international development and peace building [1]. SDP stakeholders include non- and inter-governmental organisations, national governments, sports federations, charitable foundations and professional athletes and leagues, among others. The foundational claim of SDP is that when organised thoughtfully or consciously, sport programmes can make a contribution to health promotion, gender empowerment, community cohesion and conflict resolution (among other goals) and can do so on an international scale and in regions and contexts marked by global inequality or sustained social and political challenges.

The sector has been buoyed in recent years by institutional and organisational growth and attention, including being recognised within the United Nations (UN) 2030 Agenda for Global Development and the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [2] as well as partnership commitments from powerful sports organisations like the International Olympic Committee, which advocate for and leverage sport towards social development [3]. Concomitantly, sports mega-events are now increasingly positioned as drivers of international development. Charitable foundations give support to sport-

based development programmes, and inter-governmental organisations like the Commonwealth Secretariat [4] and the UN's Department of Economic and Social Affairs work to develop SDP policies and trainings for implementation in a range of national and cultural contexts [5].

This growth in the sector has also been accompanied by a range of research activities within the broad scope of scholarly disciplines, including, but not limited to, sociology, psychology, sports management, and political science and development studies. Overall, the volume of empirically driven research into SDP that has been produced suggests that when crafted thoughtfully and carefully, SDP programmes can deliver some important benefits to participants in particular circumstances. For example, in his analysis of sports for development programmes delivered by six organisations across four countries (Uganda, Tanzania, South Africa, and India) Coalter found that many participants experienced higher levels of self-esteem and self-efficacy after having taken part in SDP programming; and that in contexts of relative scarcity or poverty (including material, emotional and/or institutional scarcity), sport-based development programmes can reasonably be expected to make a positive contribution [6].

At the same time, Coalter's analysis serves as something of a cautionary tale because his results also demonstrate the limitations of SDP. Specifically, Coalter found that: a) self-esteem and self-efficacy through SDP are more likely to improve among those who rate low on such scales to begin with, and that b) sport programming can also *negatively* affect or reduce self-esteem and self-efficacy, particularly for girls or participants who may already be on the social margins, both generally speaking and within the culture of sport. Coalter's work also draws attention to the fact that high levels of self-esteem may not be an essentially positive trait (particularly if they are not accompanied by tangible achievements); and that in some cultural contexts, self-esteem may actually be inappropriate or not a valued character trait at all as observed by Guest [7].

At one level, such tensions illustrate the equivocal nature of SDP programming. Taken a step further, though, what these and other recent analyses of SDP draw attention to are the need for critical analyses of the SDP sector and its activities, that do not presume sports programmes will necessarily produce positive outcomes. Such an approach should be further underpinned by sustained self-reflection amongst SDP advocates and stakeholders about the politics and relations of power — and therefore the ethical issues —

that are produced and sustained when pursuing international development and peace through the mobilisation of sport. Such ethical tensions feed back into understandings of the possibilities and limitations of the SDP sector in effecting positive change.

With this in mind, I highlight below some key ethical issues within the SDP field, to draw attention to the ethics of organising sport for development. I conclude with some reflections on the possibilities and limitations of SDP in light of these considerations.

### **The ethics of SDP**

When critically reflecting upon the ethical dimensions and tensions in SDP, three main issues emerge: control, mythmaking and ideology. These issues are all “ethical” in that they draw attention to unequal relations of power, demonstrate the importance of conducting SDP in ways that support development without harming people and communities, and remind us of the need to respect local autonomy, authority and diversity while reflecting on the possibilities and limitations of pursuing development through sport.

First and foremost is the issue of control and its associated relations of power. For a number of years, critical scholars have drawn attention to the question of who is in charge of SDP, through what kinds of relations, and with what effects. For example, Nicholls et al drew attention to the relations of power, knowledge and authority that are produced and constrained when claims are made that the SDP sector suffers from a “lack of evidence” [8]. Drawing on interviews with a range of key stakeholders, the authors argue that knowledge and policies in SDP often tend to be detached from the experiences of those “on the ground”; that so-called international “partnerships” tend to be dominated by funders, that planning in global SDP happens in a “top-down” process, and that results about whether SDP works, or not, are positioned as less than “true” until they are understood and/or corroborated by northern stakeholders as corroborated by Hayhurst [9]. Such critical insights demonstrate the need to respect the autonomy and self-determination of the people whom SDP programmes are designed to serve, particularly when collecting and collating evidence about what SDP can (or cannot) do. An ethical approach to SDP would therefore recognise that local people and communities understand best what sport means for them and that this should be the guiding principle when monitoring and evaluating SDP. Without this — and since relations of power on a global scale still have an impact on how the SDP sector is organised in its funding, policy and practice — control of and authority over SDP activity can actually shrink what is considered to be the sector’s knowledge base. Knowledge production in SDP is therefore political, and so SDP advocates should adopt an ethical approach that privileges the voices of those outside of SDP’s power structures.

Control here can also have other connotations. For example, in his analysis of the history and politics of Midnight Basketball in the United States, a programme designed to reduce crime by providing young men in the inner city with opportunities to play basketball during peak crime times and in vulnerable areas, Hartmann posited that the primary attraction of such programmes within the broader political culture of countries like the US was the reassurance that through such programmes, “at-risk” (read: Black) youth would be off the streets and therefore not a threat to security and stability [10]. From this perspective, the purpose and significance of SDP may be that it reassures audiences and consumers who can take solace in the fact that “something is being done” about crime and delinquency and therefore put them at psycho-social ease as they confront the problem of capitalism’s underclasses. These positive stories about the participants in SDP can be effective, in and through Orientalist processes, for reinforcing ideas about the sanctity of the capitalist political and cultural economy, by suggesting that all that is needed in response to inequality is to support youth’s inclusion in capitalism [11]. Again, this draws attention to the need for an ethical approach to SDP that supports the needs of participants first and foremost, rather than asking participants to assuage the concerns of powerful classes, and even SDP stakeholders.

### **SDP, ethics and underclasses**

It is worth reflecting here upon the fact that SDP programmes are often aimed at underclasses (defined in racialised, gendered and/or material terms) even though such hierarchies are rarely named or spoken of in mainstream SDP discourse. A key ethical dimension, then, is how are these underclasses identified and recognised as the presumed beneficiaries of SDP? This remains something of a gap in the SDP literature. As Guest found, commitments to universal humanism, while laudable, can result in SDP programmes being imposed on local communities in ways that are, at best, culturally inappropriate, and at worst forms of neo-colonialism. Identifying and meeting the actual needs of local people therefore remains a key ethical dimension of the sector [7].

Finally, the ethics of control in SDP can also be about materials and resources — which are increasingly unequal within the global political economy — and that results in international development funding and programming still tending to flow from North to South, broadly and within SDP, specifically. Such flows have implications for who is actually in charge and responsible for running SDP programmes, while raising issues of institutional control of the sector. Differential resources also have implications, as discussed above, for the question and process of determining whose knowledge counts in SDP. It even trickles down to the micro-organisational and experiential levels, as Jeanes and Lindsey have argued [12]. The

production of evidence proving whether SDP works or not is often a concern primarily for relatively powerful SDP proponents, such as international funders, and becomes a condition for their continuing support. Therefore, local people (participants, volunteers and employees of NGOs) can feel pressure to produce positive results in order to ensure that programming continues [12]. Control, then, can have implications for how people present their experiences within a context of evaluation.

It is worth recognising that while hierarchies of the kinds described above are important and significant (and often accurate) they are also not the only way to theorise SDP from an ethical perspective. Indeed, some scholars have posited the need for, or benefits of, thinking about SDP in terms that are more materially focused and even 'flatter' in theoretical terms. From these actor-network informed perspectives, the focus is less on who is in charge of SDP and more on who and how connections and networks are established in and through the SDP sector [13]. The ethical issue is that some SDP stakeholders are centrally connected to the centres of power in the sector, and enjoy the benefits that accrue, whereas others remain relatively disconnected. Regardless of how control is theorised, though, there are still ethical implications for the ways that various actants push and build the sector in particular ways. For example, it is clear that funding and money has "agency" in the sense that it serves to help the SDP sector to cohere and that for many stakeholders, access to funding becomes a condition of participating in the reality that is the SDP sector.

That said, control is but one ethical dimension of the SDP sector. A second ethical issue is the tendency, particularly among advocates and proponents, to romanticise certain sports and their utility and ability within the framework of development, or to engage in what Coalter refers to as the mythopoeic treatment of sport within SDP [14]. Myths, in this case, are not falsehoods, but more specifically are visions or versions of the truth that reflect cultural, political and institutional power. In the case of SDP, the mythopoeic treatment of sport can and often does lead to the selective celebration and reproduction of a narrow definition of sport and its positive aspects at the expense of more critical reflection. For Coalter, this process can further be seen in two ways: "Incestuous Amplification" meaning the pressure to focus on sport's positive outcomes, which are then amplified and affect subsequent evaluations, and "Displacement of Scope" or the presumption that small-scale changes within an SDP programme can and will have large-scale impacts on a social, political and/or economic level [6]. As this writer has argued, such processes of reproduction draw attention to the hegemonic underpinnings of SDP, in that the strongest proponents of SDP tend to be people who themselves have had positive experiences with sport and therefore feel a need or desire to pay this forward [15]. While such instincts are clearly laudable, they can also serve to obscure the importance of critical self-reflection on sport's role in reproducing and solidifying hierarchies of race, class, gender

and other social categories, or its compatibility with neo-liberal philosophy.

It is on that last point where scholars like Hayhurst have shown that dominant discourses of international development can reinforce neo-liberal principles in SDP [16]. For example, "the girl effect" — which argues that investment in girls and young women will have cascading benefits amidst development inequalities — can also serve to position girls and young women as stewards of their own development (and of those around them) in ways that romanticise their agency at the expense of broader social change. The broader social changes that could be pursued might include public policy or also reforming the behaviours of boys as a way to challenge patriarchy [17]. The main point here is that the 'power of sport' to support international development, a regularly cited idea amongst SDP advocates, often requires a partial recognition of sport's benefits *and* of development politics, in ways that selectively embrace the socio-material benefits and capitalist logic of sport, while leaving the potential limitations and/or detriments under-analysed.

This then leads to a third ethical issue, which is the politically ideological basis of development within the SDP sector. Critics of international development have long argued that international development was conceptualised, organised, and implemented less as a process of emancipation or equality for those external to the benefits of the global political economy and more as a way to bring the world's marginalised more closely in line with the dominant structures of the global political economy [18, 19, 20]. International development, in this way, was an extension of the colonial project [21], a form of modernisation theory put into practice [22], and/or the late-capitalist, post-modern refinement of the neo-liberal project. On the latter point, the power of neo-liberal globalisation rests in its ability to "include" the dispossessed within an inequitable and hierarchical system [23] and/or to secure the structures and contours of that political economy in ways that serve elite interests [24]. Given that SDP is a product of capitalism (to the extent that capitalism produces and underpins both international development and sport, respectively), SDP can therefore also serve a pedagogical function, becoming a way to "teach" participants, programme officials, and volunteers to fit into the capitalist system, in and through their practices and bodily habitus, and at the level of their subjectivity. Within such a context, SDP practitioners might also play a role in advancing nationalist ideologies or conforming to the dominant political structures. Critical researchers have drawn such conclusions from the ways that SDP advocates reproduce a system (of sport and class interests) in which they had positive experiences [25] and in which the dominant approach of SDP comes to be helping or preparing participants to survive amidst scarcity and inequality, rather than challenge such conditions in a transformative way [26].

## Conclusion

In this short commentary, I have aimed to draw out, identify and contextualise some of the key ethical dimensions of mobilising sports towards international development and peace building and to productively challenge the contemporary SDP sector. As a way of concluding, I consider the implications of the above in relation to the possibilities and limitations of success in SDP.

Primarily, I suggest that only through an ethical engagement with SDP are such programmes likely to succeed in achieving some sustainable, positive development outcomes. That is, it is through self-reflection on issues of control, mythmaking and ideology that SDP can best succeed. For example, if SDP programmes are delivered primarily in a top-down manner, driven by global North funders, and according to their logic and dictates, SDP is unlikely to hold cultural resonance or support local agency in ways that will actually support change. Similar conclusions have been drawn recently, particularly in the context of SDP programmes aimed at indigenous communities in Canada [27], and signal, among other issues, the need for ongoing, sustained analysis of the relations of power that create and sustain SDP policy and activity.

Further, following Hartmann and Kwauk, unless SDP stakeholders can and will differentiate between the dominant model of SDP (which primarily serves integration into a reproductive mode of culture) and a transformative one (which moves more towards critical pedagogy and activism), SDP will be pushed to the sidelines of real social change [26]. That athletes from a range of backgrounds currently and increasingly participate in social activism might serve as a model for SDP actors to embrace a more politically engaged approach to their work, should they choose to move beyond the technical challenge of SDP and towards the ethical ones. Recent examples of American football player Colin Kaepernick protesting police violence in the United States, or soccer player Megan Rapinoe calling for pay equity between men's and women's sport are potentially instructive for SDP. Hopefully, commentaries such as this one can also help to pave the way for a more critically informed and ethical approach to organising sport for development and peace on an international scale.

**Author:** Simon C Darnell (simon.darnell@utoronto.ca, <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-2742-0737>), Faculty of Kinesiology & Physical Education, University of Toronto, 55 Harbord Street, Toronto, ON M5S 2W6, CANADA

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