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## Sending balls instead of cows: Sport as a form of development aid.

What I intend to do in this presentation is to consider whether sport is an appropriate form of development aid. For it could be proposed that the money that is spent on providing sporting opportunities to impoverished countries could be spent on arguably more worthwhile ends, such as installing water-pumps, building schools, supplying health workers and donating livestock. What, one may ask, is so special about sport?

I will state and emphasize at the outset that this consideration is in its early days and I'm still trying to work through some of the issues. However, I hope to at least outline what I perceive to be the problem and stimulate some questions for discussion especially if there are some gaping holes in my reasoning.

Let me provide you with a little context which motivated this consideration. Over the last few years, I have been increasingly acquainted with various initiatives supplying the product of sport to various countries in Africa. Let me give you three different examples.

The first initiative I was involved in was a campaign called 'Boots for All' which collected old football and rugby boots, cleaned them up and donated them to children in Africa. This, I believe is the least problematic of my examples as it appears to be justified on the grounds that these boots are being recycled and redistributed when they might otherwise end up in landfill.

The second is a charity called 'Friends of Rwandan Rugby' that was founded by a couple of friends of mine. It was at a party last summer when I was chatting to the founders, Emma and Deena, whilst they were trying to persuade me to go out to Rwanda to coach rugby that

I began asking them about the rationale behind their charity. To them, it seemed obvious: rugby is a fantastic sport and everyone should have the opportunity to play it. Why Rwanda? Well, Emma spent some time there doing voluntary work, was missing playing rugby, so started coaching it to local children. In fact, they both looked visibly offended when I aired reservations about the value behind such an enterprise. Deena's reply to me was 'You only have to see how much the children enjoy it to know that it's worthwhile'.

The third example is another charity that promotes rugby to developing nations. TourAid is designed to forge partnerships between children in the UK and children in primarily African countries, whereby the UK clubs and schools host teams from overseas. The rationale given by TourAid is this:

*Tourists will receive the opportunity to leave behind (if only temporarily) the disadvantages of their home or other normal daily circumstances. They will experience travel, a different culture, a sense of a wider world which is interested in them and which has something to offer to them. In themselves, the tours will be designed to maximise immediate opportunity for self-development. (TourAid, 2008)*

It is this last example that produces the most disquiet in me. There seems to be something inherently patronising and supercilious in shipping children over to an affluent country to play sport, showing them how the other half live, and then sending them back home on the grounds that they have been developed in some way.

These are just three examples of the way that sport is used as a form of development aid. I highlighted those examples in particular as they are sports charities with which I have had direct contact, but there are countless other similar endeavours going on in various other countries and utilising various other sports. Other examples that can be given are: *Tennis for Africa*, *Cricket without Boundaries*, the football charity, *Coaching for Hope*, as well as Government funded initiatives such as *International Development through Sport*. On the *International Platform for Sport and Development* website, there are over 260 projects listed. All these projects are founded on the premise that sport has a value, whether intrinsic or

instrumental, and implicitly, that its value is as high or higher as other forms of aid projects of the same monetary cost.

It may be worth taking a step back to consider the purpose of aid and whether we have an obligation to provide aid at all? If so, what form should the aid take? What needs or interests should it fulfil?

I think the question as to whether we have an obligation to provide aid is an important one but one that I will leave for another time, although I accept that the answer we come to might have bearing on how we answer the other questions. If we, for the sake of this argument, conclude that we do have some obligation to provide aid, before we can answer the question as to what form this aid should take, we ought to consider its purpose. Before we can ask whether sport is an appropriate form of aid, we need to know what would make any form of aid worthwhile. Let us say that at the very least, aid is designed to 'add value' to the lives of individuals: to make their life better in some respect, whether that is measured by some subjective assessment of well-being, or by some other more objectively determined criterion. However, we need to be able to gain some handle on what this value is before we can assess whether anything adds to it. There are various approaches we can take to this, whether increasing happiness, pleasure, maximising preferences, promoting fiscal growth, or contributing to human flourishing.

Now, I am tempted to argue that we should accept a subjective assessment of whether aid has improved the life of that individual, in which case there would be no reason why sport or anything else for that matter (for instance, crack cocaine, ecstasy or access to unlimited sex or health spas) could be a very effective form of aid, but I concede we run up against philosophical problems, such as, if the individual is not aware of alternatives that might improve their life to a greater extent than the one he or she is aware of, they are not able to make an informed decision. With regards to aid, those providing the aid might be better informed as to what is a more effective way of adding value to a person's life. So although a supply of alcohol or drugs might increase an individual's subjective assessment of life's

value, we could argue that there are other things (perhaps such as medicine, education and agricultural tools) that would improve this value to a much greater extent. I hope you understand what I'm attempting to argue here. Basically, if we rely on a subjective assessment of worth then it doesn't allow for paternalistic judgments.

So instead, let us attempt to find an objective assessment of value. Although it has been criticised for being too abstract and not grounded in any empirical evidence, one of the most commonly known scales of human need is Maslow's (1954) hierarchy in which he provides seven different levels, with an order of prioritisation, i.e. that those needs higher up the scale can only be reached once those lower down have been met. Maslow essentially divided these needs into two sets, deficiency and growth. Deficiency needs are those that allow the individual to survive and reproduce, e.g. food, water, shelter, sex, and are engaged in because they satisfy those ends; whilst growth needs are engaged in purely for their own sake, such as the fulfilment of ambition, the acquisition of admired skills, knowledge and understanding of oneself, others and the environment, and opportunities for expressions of creativity. In essence, the higher up the scale one goes, the less it is about satisfying biological needs and more about satisfying desires linked to the experience of life.

As I said, I accept that there are many criticisms of Maslow's view, and there are equal problems attached to a theory of needs which we might be able to touch upon in the discussion. But for now, I think it is a reasonable place to start. Let us say then, even if we dismiss to a certain extent Maslow's specific categories, that a person's biological needs must be met before any social, spiritual or cognitive needs. For if a person is without water, it is unlikely they would wish to engage in creative art and philosophical conversations. And arguably, they most certainly wouldn't wish to engage in any sporting activity which would deplete their energy reserves and dehydrate them further.

So let us say at the outset, that aid must ensure that immediate and biological needs of individuals are met. Before people are given education, culture, architecture and sport, they must be able to be in a position to appreciate it; that is, not dying of hunger or thirst. That

must be the first priority. And I don't think that is really in dispute. I doubt very much that a charity would attempt to put on a football tournament in an area of starving people.

So the second question is, when these immediate biological needs have been met, where is the next priority? I wish to argue that the key lies in self-sufficiency. Critics of long term food aid argue that simply continuously providing food aid develops a culture of dependence. For if one knows that someone else will provide something free then what motivation does that person have to expend effort in achieving it by one's own means? Apart from satisfying short term needs, food aid has little long term benefit. Arguably, what is really required is enabling communities and individuals to take ownership of their own destiny. And I would very much profess that above all, education and access to raw materials enables this to occur. This would enable at the very least, self-sustainability and sufficiency. It would meet Maslow's deficiency needs which would allow for attainment of the needs for growth. So arguably, there should be a prioritisation of aid for the means for self-sufficiency and autonomy. In as far as this, I cannot see where sport can have a place... unless you could argue that sport is a means for attaining these deficiency needs which returns us to a functionalist and instrumental view of sport, which I would want to reject on the grounds that there are other aspects of community life that fulfil the same function. I would want to argue that sport does not fulfil any of the Maslow's deficiency needs and, as a form of aid, can only come after these other needs have been met.

So let us turn to second part of my consideration: the effectiveness of aid. Before I focus specifically on the idea of sport as a form of development aid, I will maintain that other forms of aid are not as effective as we are generally led to believe. William Easterly in his recent book, 'White Man's Burden', argues that the reason that so many foreign aid projects fail abysmally or even worse, that they have negative effects on economic growth – and he provides compelling evidence that these projects do fail (for instance, the US has spent \$2.3 trillion dollars on foreign aid over the last 50 years – surely enough to provide mosquito nets and anti-malaria tablets to those that need them? Incidentally, only in the last month did the British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, appear on the US TV show, American Idol, to pledge

20 million mosquito nets for malaria-hit countries. When the cost of a malaria net is so negligible, one wonders why all previous attempts to provide them have failed so miserably) – the reason, such projects fail, Easterly argues, is due to two factors; first, the belief that we in the West are the saviours to the Rest, and second, that the big problem of poverty can be solved by an equally big solution.

Easterly maintains that the failing of many traditional forms of aid is due to the top-down imposition of Planners. Instead, Easterly advocates that the most successful projects are those driven by Searchers – that is, local people on the ground searching for a solution to a particular problem. The key difference between Planners and Searchers, Easterly argues, is due to the motivation and rationale behind those groups.

*In foreign aid, Planners announce good intentions but don't motivate anyone to carry them out; Searchers find things that work and get some reward. Planners raise expectations but take no responsibility for meeting them; Searchers accept responsibility for their actions. Planners determine what to supply; Searchers find out what is in demand. Planners apply global blueprints; Searchers adapt to local conditions. Planners at the top lack knowledge of the bottom; Searchers find out what the reality is at the bottom. Planners never hear whether the planned got what it needed; Searchers find out if the customer is satisfied. (Easterly, 2006, p6)*

Ultimately, success of any project relies on accountability and feedback. Without feedback, it is difficult to assess effectiveness, and without accountability there is little motivation to ensure that what is supposed to be done is carried out.

Arguably, the situation in which Sport is used as a form of development aid appears to fit in with Easterly's conception of a planner. Someone outside the region, who believes in the instrumental value of sport, and a specific Western conception of sport, as a force for good, imposes a top-down solution on those they view as in need.

The BBC recently broadcast a series called 'Last Man Standing' in which six Western men competed in gruelling indigenous sports around the world. What one notices with these sports is the extent to which they are embedded within the rest of the culture of which they are a part. The sport itself is only a part of the wider rituals and ceremonies which encompass other manifestations of cultural and community life. A notable example of this was seen in the programme that was shot on one of the islands in Trobriand Islands in the South Pacific. Missionaries brought both cricket and Christianity to the islanders in an attempt to reduce tribal warfare but over the following decades, cricket evolved from the exemplifier of English reserve and stoicism into a ferocious and chaotic game whereby the dances, chants, taunts, body paint and black magic usually associated with war are as much a part of the game as hitting the wicket. In fact, the only resemblance to cricket that I could see were the three stumps at which the bowler aimed, and the fact that runs were scored by hitting the ball with a paddle-like bat. That there is no padding or protection for any player and the ball is a lump of hard wood that would crush a skull if it hit you on the head, would make any English player think twice before joining in.

You would think that Westerners would have learnt that indigenous cultures will only take from our culture what they perceive to fit into their own. Too often, Westerners have failed to acknowledge the interlinking of many aspects of culture, some which seem ineffective, naïve and bizarre, as belonging to part of a cohesive whole. You may recall Peter Winch's paper, 'Understanding a Primitive Society' in which he tells the story of the Azande tribe which was encouraged to give up the primitive and ineffective rituals and practices in consulting the water oracle to replace it with modern Western, and scientifically rational, farming methods. It resulted in severe crop failure. Later analysis indicated that far from being a superstitious and irrational practice, the water temple provided a means for locals to exchange information, knowledge and build networks. Taking away the temple took away associated and useful practices. As Winch argues, what to us may appear to be bizarre and ineffective makes sense in the wider culture to which those people belong. Winch compares it to Wittgenstein's concept of 'language game'.

*...to try to account for the meaningfulness of language solely in terms of isolated language games is to omit the important fact that ways of speaking are not insulated from each other in mutually exclusive systems of rules. What can be said in one context by the use of a certain expression depends for its sense on the uses of that expression in other contexts (different language games). Language games are played by men who have lives to live – lives involving a wide variety of different interests, which have all kinds of different bearings on each other. Because of this, what a man says or does may make a difference not merely to the performance of the activity upon which he is at present engaged, but to his life and to the lives of other people. Whether a man sees point in what he is doing will then depend on whether he is able to see any unity in his multifarious interests, activities, and relations with other men; what sort of sense he sees in his life will depend on the nature of this unity. (Winch, 1972, p41)*

So just as the Azande tribe's belief in witchcraft made sense to them as part of their wider culture and world view, the Trobriand islanders embedded other aspects of their culture into the game of cricket so that it made sense to them. Arguably, the game of cricket as the English know it would make as much sense to the Trobriand Islanders as their game of the same name makes to us.

Can sport be an effective and worthwhile form of aid? Aid is necessarily a donation by those with spare means and resources to those that they believe are in need of something they do not already possess. In this sense, it is paternalistic, something that the West, and in particular the former European Colonial Powers have a long history in being. I think that it is this element which makes me feel most uneasy. I accept that those involved in the sports charities that I have mentioned, have very good intentions. However, it is the idea – that is reminiscent of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century 'muscular Christianity' – that we, as 'civilized' and 'educated' peoples, know what is best for others, those that have traditionally been labelled as inferior and savage peoples, that causes me most concern.



So my conclusions are that despite the good intentions Westerners have in aiding their fellow humans, it must be acknowledged that our sports and games only make sense if they fit into the wider conception of the world and the culture as a whole. Westerners for too long have maintained a paternalistic attitude in which we attempt to bring our conception of value and the good life to those we see as in need. As Easterly persuasively showed, the most effective projects are those driven by searchers at local level who are attempting to find solutions to the problems they perceive, not the problems that Westerners believe they have.

For us, our conception of sport makes sense within our 'language game'. It has evolved from our history and with a meaning that fits with our understanding of the world and our place within it. Other cultures may derive a very different meaning or none at all from the same game. If we follow Easterly's conception of effective aid, then it must be that those at a local level acknowledge and search for the value that sport offers to them to solve particular local problems. Simply imposing a Western conception of the value of sport top-down may be as ineffective and meaningless as providing the same people with an Xbox360.

So let me return to comment specifically on the three examples I gave at the beginning. The charity 'Boots for All' which recycles unwanted football and rugby boots to donate to those that need them, seems to me seems to be the most acceptable form of sports aid. It is not dictating what those living in other countries should be doing, and it may be that the boots donated fulfil a different function to that which they were originally designed in that they might not simply be used to play football or rugby. I suppose the question remains as to whether the cost and energy expended in transporting those boots to their final destination could have been more effectively spent.

So would I recommend to Emma and Deena to give up their initiative of developing rugby in Rwanda? No, I don't think I would, and I have the greatest respect for them and their ambitions in this area. Emma and Deena are two individuals that really care about the local people and communities they live with. They have enough experience and knowledge on the

ground to know whether what they are doing is wanted and valued by the local communities. I feel quite confident that they would be unlikely to promote rugby to those that do not have their basic biological needs being met. And arguably, arranging rugby games for those that are most concerned about their immediate needs would be a futile task. Emma and Deena are in a much better position than I to make those kinds of judgements and decisions. And I'm sure that they would argue that the value gained from organising rugby is much greater than simply playing the game itself. And it may be that if Deena and Emma hadn't set up this charity, they would have little, if anything, to do with these communities. However, I would encourage anyone working on these kinds of initiatives to recognise that meaning and sense in these games must be embedded in the wider culture of that community.

What about TourAid? This is the initiative that I have the most concern about. I accept that cultural exchanges are valuable in themselves in learning about other ways of life, but it has to be an equal and two way process. Simply shipping children thousands of miles and arranging a rugby tournament for them arguably has little value if those children lack the autonomy to make decisions about their own lives and their future. I'm just not convinced that this project has any great beneficial effects. I would argue that there are much more effective ways of donating resources.

Ultimately, aid should be driven by those at local level. They are the ones that perceive a need and are searching for solutions as to how to address these needs. And they are the ones that will ensure that any aid is effective. Imposing paternalistic top-down solutions that is determined by what we (i.e. the West) perceive the needs of the Rest to be, is at best naïve and at worst, an inexcusable waste of resources.

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## **References**

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