Managing Sport-Based Peace Initiatives

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Sport is a social institution that wields power and influence on a large scale in society (Coakley, 2007; Wolf, 1990). Estimated at $450 billion, sport has significant economic influence (Plunkett, 2009). Sport serves as a potent mechanism applicable to a myriad of social objectives; and a valuable means for nations and cultures to establish and enhance relationships, as well as for individuals within diverse cultures to engage with one another. As reflected in recent NASSM Zeigler Award lectures, the recognition and utilization of sport as a vehicle for social justice and peace building has gained prominence (Hums, 2009; Thibault, 2008).

Beer and Nohria (2000) delineate the direction of organizational change, positing that Theory E, or top down change, may initially have a more economic upside, but may lack sustainability. Theory O, on the other hand, may have more immediate costs, but yield sustainable results in the long-term process of change (Simpson, Hamber, and Scott, 2001). In building cultures of peace, top-down approaches are commonplace and garner both resources and attention; however, bottom-up initiatives are essential in humanizing disparate stakeholders and facilitating mutual understanding (Beers and Nohria, 2000). Both interpersonal and intergroup contact is essential in fostering peace and resolving conflict (Kuriansky, 2007). Obligatory interaction between segregated groups has yielded reduced hostility between groups, broken down stereotypes, stimulated more tolerant attitudes, and brought fresh knowledge that serves to remove intergroup suspicion and fear (Allport, 1954). Multiple sport-based peace initiatives at the grassroots level, when taken collectively, will yield broad impact in building a culture of peace.

The process toward peace-building through sport must be sensitive to specific cultures, and acknowledge the differences and similarities of local populations (Lytras, 2008). Sport can, within this framework, be a valuable mechanism in fostering peace and social justice. In light of that, a sampling of diverse sport-based peace initiatives is examined. Of the many non-profit organizations deliver community based programs in support of peace and development, the YMCA and YWCA impact a combined 40 million members with programming worldwide (Hums and MacLean, 2009). Peace Players International uses basketball to bring conflicting groups together, such as Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, or Israelis and Palestinians in the Middle East (Ford, 2006). For-profit corporations acknowledge their responsibility toward greater society through engagement in socially responsible initiatives (Babiak & Wolfe, 2006; Walker, 2008). Sport and non-sport organizations, such as Coca Cola, Nike, or the NBA's Basketball without Borders, may also seek mutual benefit through their socially responsible initiatives, (Cregan, 2008; Means & Nauright, 2007; Snell, 2007). Many organizations around the world, including the International Olympic Committee (IOC, 2004) and the United Nations (UN, 2005), recognize the unique characteristics of sport that allow it to bridge divides based on class, race, religion, ethnicity, national citizenship, and gender.

Based on the foundation and examples provided, specific implications emerge for those charged with managing sport for purposes of promoting peace, social justice, and human rights. The management of sport-based peace initiatives will be discussed. For example, many initiatives are not financially self sustaining; rather, they must obtain financial support through public and private investment in support of sport as an agent of cultural change. In addition to an overview of the management of sport-based peace initiatives, recommendations for future study will be presented.