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Reallocating Soft Power in Sports: From Political Agendas to Sustainable Peace and Development

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Abstract

Sport is more than just a game. Beyond trophies and glory, it's a geopolitical game played by businesses and governments. Being cross-cultural, profitable, and influential, sport has become a sought-after tool of geopolitical soft power. However, sport is being used to coverup human rights abuses by states and to "clean up" a state's reputation. To counter this, a Sustainable Peace and Development Sports Policy (SPDSP) should be developed. Such a plan can help ensure that sport foregrounds sustainable development goals and targets.

Keywords: sport; gender; women in sports; soft power; foreign policy

Introduction

Sport is changing the world. Today, sport is a key player in the game of geopolitics, where it is commonly used as a diplomatic tool. While the field of play appears to be commercial, the points scored count as diplomatic or political. Targeted investments in certain sports, teams, or sporting events are commonly used by countries to strengthen their global reputation. In other words, countries can shift their public image to one affiliated with a winning sports team, supported by most of the populace, and away from a negative public image attached to their violent foreign policy strategies or their racist and sexist internal policies. Drawing on the

popularity of sport, and its power as a consumer-driven industry, states can use their influence in sport as a tool of soft power to create, improve, or “clean up” their public images. Such tactics are increasingly important in the realm of international foreign policy.

In order to challenge the growing influence of state actors in sport, this paper argues that a Sustainable Peace and Development Sports Policy (SPDSP) should be developed and implemented. Such a plan must include peace action plans (PAP) and development action plans (DAP) that are aligned with the United Nation’s (UN) sustainable development goals (SDGs) at the governing, regulating, and operational levels of sport. SPDSP offers an alternative approach to soft power use in sport through a shift in investments from pure business and diplomacy toward universal and sustainable development while depoliticizing and detokenizing human rights in this industry.

Changing Models of Sport

Sport, known today for its competitive structure, governance, fanbase, and more, goes back to the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In Europe, sport developed in relation to a social democratic framework. Meanwhile, in the U.S., sport was quickly commercialized and regulated in response to its economic potential. This neoclassical sports model was further reinforced during the post-World War II era and during the Industrial Revolution, as commercial focus on this booming industry grew. The growing influence of the market on sport, however, demands a new analysis of sport around the world as a potential tool of diplomacy. As Chadwick (2022a) writes, a more useful way of thinking about sport is through the lens of geopolitical economy, which can help track not only how states are investing in sport and why, but the ways

that certain investments and attachments to different teams or clubs can impact international foreign policy and the public image of various states.

The employment of soft power in sport is a tool to create, improve, or wash clean a state's public reputation. This is possible because of the industry's influence and strength around the world. The growing market share of sport and its successful convergence with industries like entertainment and media at the consumer level have led to its use as a strategic tool to build international relevance and favorable images that then work to cover up some of the negative international and domestic policies that states choose to enforce (Cafiero & Alexander, 2020). Team acquisition, sponsorship portfolios, world rankings, hosting global sports events, and other commercially viable activities in sport are all mechanisms that states can use to modify their global images and influence. Winning on the field, appearing on it—in the form of advertisements, for example, or on team logos—or hosting an event, such as the FIFA world cup, are all becoming the “off-field” equivalent of scoring a “diplomatic goal.” Create a beautiful, world class stadium and people will forget some of the human rights violations the country has committed. Sponsor a well-known and winning team, and perhaps there will be less pushback from that team's supporters regarding a country's policies. All of these things have happened because of state involvement in sport.

Several different strategies exist when it comes to soft power in sport. “Seduce and shock,” for example, is one of the templates employed by states. Seduce and shock occurs when a country either hosts an important sporting event or becomes an important sponsor of a specific team, and later follows this with a political move that goes against the international community's wishes or demands. As Chadwick (2022b) writes, seduce and shock techniques are

seen when event hosting nations “seduce” the international world through their state-of-the-art facilities, but later “shock” with negative policies or stories. This was the case of the 2014 Winter Olympics, held in Sochi, Russia, when several Russian athletes were accused of violating anti-doping regulations. Similarly, and more recently, Qatar, the host of the FIFA World Cup 2022, was accused of covering up hundreds of egregious labor violations against the workers who were constructing the new state of the art facility for the World Cup. And yet, the World Cup was hosted as planned by Qatar.

Sport for Diplomacy versus Sport for Development and Peace

The scope of soft power in sport extends beyond the commonly cited tactic of garnering global attention by staging considerable and elite sporting events (Grix et al., 2019), and other business activities like sponsorships and ownerships. Rather, it encompasses a range of intra-state approaches and operates at both the local and global levels. This highlights the importance of developing and using a Sports for Development and Peace (SDP) model for achieving diverse human rights and development goals through sport. A Sustainable Peace and Development Sports Policy (SPDSP) is a framework centered around redirecting the monetization of political agendas and foreign policies through sport toward the monetization of peace and sustainable development (Dudfield & Dingwall-Smith, 2015). SPDSP takes a step outside the traditional franchise model of the sports industry and offers an inclusive and intersectional model established on the incorporation of peace and development at the core of sports governance and operations. It is a multidimensional policy framework inspired by Feminist Foreign Policy (FFP) that aims to elevate marginalized groups, developing countries, and underserved sectors and economies in sport. Broadly, FFP aims to “scrutinize the destructive forces of patriarchy,

colonization, heteronormativity, capitalism, racism, imperialism, and militarism” that are supported and perpetuated by nations utilizing soft power in sport (Center for Feminist Foreign Policy [CFFP], 2021).

Why Do We Need a Sports for Development and Peace Framework?

Gender equality, anti-racism, the inclusion and rights of the LGBTQ+ community, democracy, and treatment of migrant workers, alongside other matters related to human rights, peace, and development, have become a key factor in determining the ability of states to participate in various sports events such as the Olympics. However, this has often led to a more tokenistic approach to human rights, rather than a sustainable and long-term shift in domestic and international politics that will protect the rights of vulnerable groups. For example, it was not until very recently, following the murder of George Floyd, that the sports industry in the U.S., and others around the world, started to speak up against racism. However, declarations made by and across media actors and organizations fail to be in line with the reality of black people, since these declarations often focused primarily on black people in sport, rather than the impacts of racism as a structural issue affecting all parts of society (Agyemang, 2020). In Saudi Arabia, tokenistic human rights in sport have presented the country as a gender equitable place vis-à-vis its promotion of a female ambassador for Formula One racing. However, the country is still one of the most gender inequitable countries in the Arab region and the world. Recently, Qatar’s use of soft power diplomacy in sport prior to the upcoming FIFA World Cup has allowed it to position itself as an important global player, meanwhile, it banned the presence of rainbow flags representative of LGBTQ+ rights (Associated Press, 2020). Additionally, the country has not taken responsibility for the many labor violations it has perpetuated against a class of migrant laborers

tasked with building the new stadiums. Finally, in the wake of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, nearly every sporting platform has shown solidarity with Ukraine by adding the Ukrainian colors or flag to their uniforms, their stadiums, and other sports paraphernalia. Meanwhile, support for Palestinian athletes and teams is treated with hostility because it is considered a “complex” or “exceptional” problem (Baroud, 2022). This issue is simply the politicization of human rights, which has begun to dominate sport around the world.

To move beyond such tokenistic approaches to human rights, and to prevent such soft power tactics like the “seduce and shock” politics of various states, a SPDSP is needed. Foregrounding diversity and inclusion can help to promote human rights with the aim to make substantial and long-term change. One of the most skilled footballers of our time, Mohamed Salah’s activism and reputation both on and off the football pitch has been linked to reduced crimes in Liverpool induced by islamophobia by 19% and cyberhate by 50% (Wells, 2019). This example shows that sport can contribute to peace and sustainable development.

Developing a Sustainable Peace and Development Sports Policy

SPDSP will be put into practice through peace action plans (PAPs) and development action plans (DAPs), in line with UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNCSR 1325), which identifies four focus areas: participation, protection, prevention, relief and recovery. All action plans are then reviewed, approved, measured, and monitored by the SPDSP Coordination and Planning Committee (CPC) which is responsible for ensuring coherence across and among different sports, nations, and stakeholders to widen and deepen the impact of these plans. It will have bodies responsible for SDP in each sport for each country applying the SPDSP. The CPC will

be representative of all countries and the committee itself will adhere to intersectionality and inclusion.

PAPs will be developed by the upper governing body of the sporting event and will be based on an evaluation done by both the government and local governing bodies of the sport to evaluate the biggest contributors to peace and anti-peace within the geographic reach of the sport. The SPDSP body responsible for this sport in this country will then provide an instructive framework to be applied. In addition, the entities responsible for the PAP and the national action plan (NAP) of the UNCSR 1325, in countries where both are operational, should collaborate to find common grounds of operation between the two action plans which would ultimately strengthen the implementation and effects of both plans. It is suggested that a total of 17 DAPs will be developed per country to meet the specific needs of each location. The DAPs should be modeled after the UN SDG.

An important part off any SPDSP includes monitoring and evaluating the involvement of local and regional partners, for example business partners. Ideally, partners should have or should establish a diversity, equity, and inclusion department or desk to help mainstream these principles. Other ideas include collaborating with local women’s and human rights civil society organizations to ensure that all SPDSP plans are up to date. Sample DAP targets might include:

5.1: Put an end to all sorts of discrimination against women and girls throughout every level and aspect of the sports industry and matters in operations with it.

5.2: Eliminate all forms of violence, bullying, and hate speech against all women and girls in sports spheres (athletes, workers, and fans).

5.3: Eliminate sexist practices in the sports industry as a whole. This should include reforming parental leave policies and amending legislation to support equal access to healthcare for both men and women.

5.4: Recognize and value the female presence in the sports industry by an at least 40% quota for female candidates for all departments and bodies available in the sports industry based on merit. 50% of this quota will check the intersectional and inclusive requirements of the SPDSP.

5.5: Ensure women's full participation in, and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, sports, and business aspects of the industry.

5.6: Ensure universal access to girls and female sports by collaborating with local TV and online channels.

5.7: Ensure universal awareness about the important roles that women can play in sport beyond being an athlete.

5.8: Ensure universal awareness and education of issues and matters pertaining to women's rights in sport. This might include following the lead of global campaigns such as the "Her Game Matters Too" campaign.

5.9: Ensure all public schools accomplish the mandatory trip of all classes to various female sporting events in the local area.

5.10: Ensure that each club or team has a monetized cyber fanbase that promotes interest and increased watch of female sports through a points/post or tweet program where points can be counted as rewards.

5.11: Ensure that investments in female sports are increasing during every quarter of the year and collaborate with states and other businesses to provide incentives when needed.

5.12: Establish and ensure the successful implementation of programming that supports the development of women and girls in support. A good example of this type of programming is the "Get Her Involved in Sports" scholarship and development program.

Conclusion

Sports may seem like a paradoxical avenue to accomplish sustainable development. SPDSP, however, makes human rights and development a universal goal that can be achieved through the universal attractiveness of sport. The extensive reach of sport, and the huge numbers of people following various sport teams and clubs can be a powerful tool for the dissemination of human rights and gender equality. For that reason, the development of an SPDSP is necessary to move beyond a tokenistic approach to human rights in sport.

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