

Sport as a Catalyst for Social Cohesion in Fragmented Communities. A View from Post-Apartheid South Africa

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Abstract

Sport is historically viewed as bringing people together. Accordingly, sport has different effects on the participants. There are feelings of joy when your team wins and feelings of despair when the team is losing. The aim of the article was to determine if sport could be an enabling factor for social cohesion in fragmented communities. A qualitative methodology was deemed appropriate for this study. A total of 100 participants were interviewed, comprising of community leaders, team members and parents. Semi-structured interview schedule was used to collect data. The contribution of sport to social cohesion and nation-building is mostly studied from a formal organized perspective. This article's focus is not on organized sport but on sport that is organized and driven by communities. In particular, if these events are able to contribute to social cohesion and building fragmented societies. The findings suggest that community sport events have the potential to contribute and promote social cohesion.

Keywords: social cohesion, trust, sense of belonging, crime, local government, sport festival, poverty, fragmented societies, community sport

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Introduction

Sport is practiced and enjoyed by millions across the world and many benefits are associated with it. In South Africa, though, sport was not always viewed as a tool for nation-building. The 350 years of racial segregation and human rights abuse created a highly racially and economically polarized society. Sport during the apartheid years was seen by the black majority as advancing the policy agenda of the apartheid government. In 1994, South Africans participated in free and fair elections, for the first time in the history of the country. The newly adopted Republic of South Africa Constitution of 1996 enshrines the values of equality and freedom from oppression in any form or shape. A number of policies were repealed and new policies promulgated to integrate a racially divided society and foster a sense of unity. Interventions such as the national anthem, a new national flag, and the recognition of all indigenous languages were formulated with the singular purpose of creating a new national identity. Sport was central in advancing the reconciliatory and nation-building agenda of the state. The first president of South Africa, the late Nelson Mandela's reconciliatory leadership set the tone for the path to nation-building, reconciliation and social cohesion. In 1995, a year after democracy, the South African rugby team won the rugby world cup. Mandela joined the rugby team on the field and held the rugby world cup trophy up high. This was symbolic in nature, signifying a new democratic South Africa of nation-building and togetherness.

However, these attempts towards nation-building and social cohesion were psychological in nature and did not change the underlying structural problems and the lived reality of the poor and marginalized that continued to live in abject poverty and inhumane conditions. The black residential areas were and are still characterized by substandard basic services such as water, sanitation, refuse collection, economic opportunities and poor infrastructure. The over-crowded unhealthy living conditions became fertile breeding grounds for crime, substance abuse and associated societal problems. The expectation on part of the poor and marginalized was that the newly elected democratic government of 1994 would improve their socio-economic conditions. This did not materialize and the communities feel socially excluded and their sense of belonging to the newly found democratic freedom remains non-existent Cassity and Gow, (2005).

This article contributes to the academic discourse on whether community sport events have the potential to contribute to building trust, a sense of belonging and in the process advance social cohesion and build fragmented societies.

Sport and Social Cohesion

According to various authors sport plays a major contributing role towards nation-building and social cohesion. Putman (2000) concludes in his study of the bowling sport that it leads to social capital because of the social interaction amongst the players and the spectators. Furthermore, the participants' tolerance and trust levels

increase and are higher than that of the non-participants. Sport builds long-term relationships and, in many instances, access to networks that could be beneficial to those that are part of the network. Caruso (2009) continues in similar vein by stating that sport contributes to active citizenship, social inclusion and societal integration. According to Brown, Hoye and Nicholson (2012) sport contributes to increased levels of trust, build networks and reciprocity and ultimately leads to the strengthening of community. Brown, Hoye and Nicholson (2012) postulate that sport participation creates an enabling environment for the cultivation of trust in strangers.

According to Jamieson (2014:58) sport can play a major role in bringing together communities and building social cohesion within fragmented communities. Therefore, at a community level sport is an important building block of social cohesion. Sport has the potential to build a community by improving the sense of belonging, self-esteem and social cohesion. Labuschagne (2008) states that major sport events, such as the Soccer World Cup contributes to nation building and social cohesion. Chalip (2006:110) is of the view that after a sport event it feels as if “a new energy had been injected” into the community. In this regard sport has a positive effect on the general well-being of society, in other words, the feel-good feeling associated with winning and being part of group. A general consensus thus seems that sport is a contributing factor to social cohesion. Though, the authors do not necessarily take cognizance of the socio-economic environment in which sport takes place and state if this would counter the positive aspects of sport towards social cohesion.

Sense of Community

This article focusses on community sport events and therefore it is important to have a sense and understanding of what a community is. Communities are characterized by relationships and networks that had been fostered over time and entails a degree of togetherness, personal relationships and commitment to common values and norms (Skinner & Zakus, 2008). The networks created are the conduits for the building of trust and community members are glued together by the elements of social cohesion such as trust and a sense of belonging (Putman, 2000). Skinner and Zakus (2008) described a sense of belonging as the feeling of being part of a society. Given their inhumane living conditions, the poor and marginalized have no sense of belonging and social inclusion is non-existent. Instead the feelings of socio-economic exclusion, deprivation, hopelessness, and high levels of distrust and being treated unfairly prevail.

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2012) states that a socially cohesive society creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust, and builds social capital. The OECD (2012) describes a cohesive society as one which “works towards the well-being of all its members, fights exclusion and marginalization, creates a sense of belonging, promotes trust, and offers its members the opportunity of upward social mobility.”

More recently, the term social cohesion had been used in studies of crime and violence and it is said that the increasing levels of crime and violence is a sign of weak social cohesion Veit, Barolsky & Pillay, (2009). The lack of social cohesion in South Africa is a manifestation of apartheid, which led to social disintegration and the erosion of social values amongst marginalized communities. The Apartheid government’s spatial segregation planning and lack of development resulted in black townships being characterized by high levels of poverty, unemployment, domestic violence, alcoholism, crime, drug abuse and a lack of social cohesion. The resultant effect is a low-level of trust and sense of belonging in the community.

Trust and Sense of Belonging

Trust is an important element that ties a community together and stimulates cooperation between its members. It is an essential indicator of the confidence level citizens have in a government’s ability to improve their living conditions and allow them to experience a better life (Esua, 2005). Trust is a reflection of the belief and hope which citizens have in a government to deliver effective and efficient basic goods and services (Va De Walle and Bouckaret., 2003: 894). It speaks to the ability of a government to deliver quality service in a neutral and impartial manner, which in turn enhances the legitimacy of the government and builds trust and a sense of belonging amongst community members.

Therefore, a sense of belonging is located within social cohesion in societal relations, attitudes and norms Chan, To & Chan, (2006: 290). A sense of belonging is synonymous with a feeling of being at home and feelings of relatedness Thaver, (2004). It emphasizes the existence of social relations that are established with other social actors in a given place and which facilitates mutual assurances to feel a part of the community Tabane and Huma-Vogel, (2010). According to Kitchen, Williams and Gallina (2015) a sense of belonging is experienced is when an individual experiences a feeling that he/she is important, valued by others and belong to the group. This feeling of a sense of belonging contributes to the feel-good feeling and contributes to quality of life. It could thus be argued that a sense of belonging contributes to the general well-being of an individual and the community generally. Similarly, Bahram and Mohammad (2010: 563) describes a place “as a context for activities that has a cognitive identity that encompasses diverse social worlds and a history, joining past, present and future together”. Therefore, a sense of belonging to a place reinforces a cognitive relationship with a place

Ingram, (2012: 6). It strengthens consensus and binds people together around common values and symbols of a community. The sense of belonging amongst the marginalized and impoverished communities is very weak or non-existent, because of their adverse living conditions.

Research Method

The study was qualitative in nature and the case method was used to explore whether sport contributes to building social cohesion in fragmented societies Creswell, (2014). Multiple data collection methods were used. The researchers observed the behavior of the participants as well as interviewed them at different periods over a three-month period. Participants were interviewed at the beginning, during and at the end of the event. The reason for the methodological approach was to gauge in what way, if any, the sports event impacted on social cohesion. In particular, it was investigated if the trust and sense of belonging of communities changed over the duration of the sport event and if it remained the same after the event.

The sample size was approximately 100 participants comprised of members of the organizing committee, the local ward councilor, families (residents) residing in the flats, the team members of the various teams and spectators, councilors, youth, adults and senior citizens. Purposive random sampling was used and the sample comprises of 40% male and 60% female respondents. The purposive sample was applied to the councilors and members of organizing committee, whilst the random sampling was applied to the team members, spectators and residence residents. Approximately 80% of the sample resided within the area for longer than 10 years. The participants therefore have a fairly good knowledge of the community and the challenges of residing in the area.

Semi-structured interviews and observations were used to collect the data. The observations allowed for an exploration of the behavioral patterns of engagement amongst the community members over the duration of the sport event. This enabled the collection of data from the participants in their environment and hence increased the authenticity of the data collected. The use of multiple data collection methods contributed to addressing the concern of subjectivity and ensured the objectivity and reliability of the findings. The questions posed were mainly to determine if the sport contributed to social cohesion and improved the sense of belonging and if the trust level of the community had changed positively.

Atlantis Community: A Fragmented Community

The South African apartheid government during the 70's established the Atlantis township as a relocation site for poor black communities. It is situated approximately 30 kilometers away from Cape Town. Cape Town is a major South African economic and tourist hub situated on the southern tip of the African continent. Atlantis is a suburb of Cape Town and has a population size of approximately 67 491 with the majority of the residents being Colored (85%) followed by the African people (15%) (South African Census 2011, FCR,1992).

Atlantis is semi-rural town with predominantly social housing with poorly constructed overcrowded blocks of apartments, commonly known as flats. A block of flats houses approximately sixty families. The apartments normally have two bedrooms and able to accommodate a family of four members but the apartments are overcrowded and occupied by five to eight persons. These flats are areas of conflict and a breeding ground for delinquent behavior. Residents are in constant conflict regarding the use of communal facilities such as washing lines or the use of parking space. Luhanga, (2018) states that some of the residents belong to the local gangs which terrorize the local residents who live in fear. Instead of being a place where people live, work and play these blocks of flats have become a breeding place for gangsterism, substance abuse and conflict amongst residents.

The Atlantis community is highly fragmented and low levels of trust exist between community members and a sense of belonging is non-existent. As one resident explains:

'I am staying here not out of choice but due to my circumstances. If I could leave today, I will do so gladly' (anonymous interview October 2019, Atlantis).

The residents generally have a low sense of belonging and find it difficult to call Atlantis a home. In the main it is ascribed to poor living conditions and the associated conditions, such as the unsafe environment, high crime rates, gangsterism and a poor quality of life. The residents feel alienated and if given the opportunity many would prefer moving to another suburb.

The Communal Sport Event

The communal sport event was the initiative of the local ward councilor and she stated that she was

"Looking for an intervention to bring a fragmented society together and change the negative outlook of the community into a positive one" (F. Abrahams, Ward councilor, interviewed October 2019).

According to Abrahams (2019) an important principal for the sport event was that it had to be community driven to ensure ownership and buy-in. The principle of community ownership and stakeholder inclusivity was based on the principle that ownership will increase the legitimacy of the project. Participation was voluntary and contributed to the community ownership of the sport event Green, Janmaat and Han, (2009). Various

stakeholders participated to make the communal sport event a success. The local municipality partnered and constructed netball playing fields within the flats' precinct and ensured access to the local sport field. An organizing committee was established who was responsible for the general management of the sport event. The committee comprised of various role players to ensure representation and involvement. Stakeholder representivity was vital to ensure community buy-in and ownership. Atlantis was divided into four different zones, with a zonal representative being part of the organizing committee. Each zone has its own steering committee comprising of representatives of blocks of flats. Each block of flats in turn established a steering committee to represent the residents' interests. The structure ensured that stakeholders are represented and inclusive of the decision-making process. This approach was a major contributor to the success of the sport event. The different blocks of flats establish teams or combine to form teams which compete against each other. The local municipality constructed a netball court within the precinct of each block of flats. This enabled the residence of a block of flats to compete with each other and the families could watch and socialize. The bottom-up approach to the sport event created platforms for smaller groups to re-acquaint with each other and re-establish relationships.

The Atlantis sport festival took place over a three-month period. The final sport event was held within a no-go area which is an area renowned for its high crime rate, gangsterism and turf wars. A no-go area is controlled by a gang and only the locals are permitted to frequent it and any outsider is seen as a threat. The venue for the final event was a sign of defiance by the community and to demonstrate to the criminals that the community is taking their town back from the criminal element.

Results

The first part presents the results regarding a sense of belonging.

How do feel about calling Atlantis home?					
Beginning of Sport event		During the sport event		After the sport event	
Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive	Negative	Positive
100%		100%		100%	

The views of the community remain the same regarding the sense of belonging. This has not shown meaningful change over the duration of the sport event. If given the opportunity the majority of the respondents would leave Atlantis immediately. This is contributed to other structural factors impacting on their living conditions.

What is/are the main reason/s that you want to leave?

Crime and unemployment were major influencing factors and if possible, they would leave Atlantis, as one participant stated: *"...crime in Atlantis is out of control because it is not safe for women and children to walk alone at night. Women in particular in this community are victims of rape and domestic violence. This place is definitely not safe for women and children because we live in fear that one day someone will attack and rape you."*

Unemployment

According to (80%) of the participant's unemployment is another factor that is forcing them to relocate. Participants state that: *"many people are unemployed and have nothing else to do. The local economy does not generate sufficient employment opportunities. The adverse economic situation resulted in a local factory that employed a large percentage of locals closing down. This resulted in a large percentage of people becoming unemployed and unable to fend for themselves. Many have left to seek employment in other towns."*

The second part of the questions was aimed at determining if sport has an impact on community trust levels in any way. The data was collected at the beginning of the event, during and after the event. The objective as indicated was to gauge if the sport event impacted on the trust levels.

Question	Beginning Sport Festival	During The event	After the Event
What is your view about the sport festival –will it improve relationships?	60% of sample was not sure if sport will improve their relationships with others.	All participants indicated that sport brings a community together- allows them to see beyond our differences.	The participants indicated that sport has the potential to improve the relationship but no event was arranged after the sports event to strengthen the relationships and they continued with their normal activities

Question	Beginning Festival	Sport	During The event	After the Event
Did it improve your relationships with community members?	50% of participants indicated that they seldom if ever speak to their neighbours.		An improvement was noticed and nearly every participant that was previously negative started to speak to their neighbours.	Approximately 60% of participants indicated that they continued speaking to their neighbors after the event.
Would you call your neighbor when you are in need?	50% indicated that they are not speaking to their neighbours.		More than 60% indicated that they will call and ask for help.	Approximately 70% of the participants indicated that they will ask for help.
Do you think your neighbour would assist you?	Approximately 50% indicated that their neighbour will not assist them.		70% of the sample indicated that they are sure that their neighbour will assist them.	80% indicated that their neighbor will assist them.
Do you think that the sport event has improved the trust between community members?	This was negative and 70% indicated: "No."		50% indicated that the event was too short to meaningfully improve the level of trust between people.	50% indicated a slight improvement – But were not sure if this would be sustainable
Does it contribute to building friendships?	60% indicated that sport does not contribute to building friendships.		60% of sample indicated that the sporting event has created an opportunity to engage with others.	70% of the participants indicated that they greeted their neighbours but are not friends.
Would you continue with the friendship after the tournament?	80 % indicated that they would not, but would see over the event if their view would change.		60 % of the sample indicated that they were not sure- because all of them have our own families and commitments.	60% indicated that they were not sure.
Do you think the festival could contribute to crime prevention?	70 % of sample indicated that it would not contribute to crime prevention.		70 % of sample were of view that a sport festival brings people together, but it does not address the causes of crime.	100% of sample indicated that sport does not address the causes of crime.
What is your view of the police.	80% of sample indicated that they do not trust the police.		The participants' view of the police remained the same.	The view of the sample towards the police had not changed.
Do you think that the sport festival will improve your living conditions?	100% of sample indicated that the sport event will not improve their living conditions.		100 % indicated that the festival will not change the economic and social situation.	The response remains the same that the sport event will not improve the living conditions.
What benefits do the sport festival have?	80% of the participants indicated that they were not sure.		50 % indicated that the sport event brought the community together and made them feel good and forget about our circumstances.	100 % of participants indicated that during the event they experienced a feel-good feeling, but thereafter the situation remained the same as before tournament.

Findings and Discussion

The Atlantis sport festival was a catalyst for people to look beyond their personal differences and rally behind a common goal and in the process bring the community together. The identification of and securing the buy-in of important individuals were integral parts of the successful delivery of the sports festival.

The sport event was a collective effort and represented the different blocks of flats and this contributed to the success of the social cohesion project. The willingness of the residents to participate voluntarily contributed largely to the success of the sport festival. The stakeholder representivity in the decision-making structure ensured community ownership of the festival. Everybody felt included, valued and rallied behind a common goal. In this manner sport contributed to a sense of identity and belonging to a common cause. The findings support the view of Kitchen, Williams and Gallina (2015) regarding the sense of belonging.

The police, though, were not represented at any of the forums or at the events. According to the local ward councilor the community has a low level of trust in the police and their presence could fuel rather than diffuse conflict. The finding supports the view of Esau (2005) that trust in public institutions is linked to their degree of satisfaction regarding services rendered. This seems to be the situation between the Atlantis community and the police. The community would call the police to resolve conflicts, but simultaneously has a low level of trust in the police. The organizing group took a decision not to invite the police to any of their events, because their presence could cause more harm than good. The responsibility to host a sports event within a safe environment then became the community's responsibility. No incidence of violence was registered at any of their events. This demonstrates that when communities rally around a common objective aimed at benefitting society it can be successful.

Notably, the community ownership of the sport festival brought the Atlantis community together and could be viewed as the glue that binds them together Pevaiz, (2012). New friendships were fostered and the sport event had the potential of breaking down the 'no-go areas' and advancing future social cohesion and building an integrated crime free Atlantis community. The final event was hosted in a no-go area renowned for its high crime rate. It was organized as a family event in a public park with no access control. Whilst the various sport teams competed, families were interacting and enjoying the music and having a barbeque. The community ownership of the project resulted in differences being set aside and the event taking place without incident. This supports the view that events that are community owned and supported will be successful.

The findings showed that the Atlantis sport festival contributed to an increased sense of belonging within the community Ingram, (2012). The findings indicated that during the event an increased sense of belonging was experienced, although it was not sustained and the sense of belonging disappeared after the event. The community's sense of belonging to the place of residence did not change because the sport festival did not change their daily lived reality.

After the sport event the community returned to their norm of a dysfunctional society characterized by substance abuse, unemployment, inequality, poverty, a high crime rate and low levels of trust. The findings indicate that the sense of belonging did not change and supports the view of Cassity and Gow (2005). Although the community sport festival has the potential to contribute to social cohesion, it requires a sustained integrated approach by various stakeholders to institutionalize social cohesion. The contribution of sport to social cohesion in an abnormal society characterized by a lack of basic services will only be short-lived. Unless the underlying structural deficiencies are addressed sport events' contribution to social cohesion will be minimal.

Conclusion

Research indicated that community sport events could be used as a tool to foster trust and social cohesion within dysfunctional communities. But it has limited potential to contribute to sustainable social cohesion in vulnerable communities. In the main it is because sport events do not address or change the living conditions of the community. Moreover, sustainable social cohesion requires a collective effort from various stakeholders. It requires a collaborative effort between the state and civil society to bring about change in the living conditions of the people by providing quality services in an equitable sustainable manner. Sport events, though, create a feel-good feeling and a sense of belonging. If this good feeling could be nurtured over a longer period and in combination with addressing the underlying causes of poverty and inequality, then the possibility exists for building trust and a sense of belonging. Sport festivals hold the potential to facilitate a spirit of solidarity and unity amongst community members and ultimately social cohesion, but they can only be effective and lasting if the living conditions of communities improve. If not, then sport events' contribution to social cohesion is limited.

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