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# Sport and Economic Development: The Case of Bangladesh

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# Sport and Economic Development

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The Case of Bangladesh

## Sport-For-Development

The conviction that sport can be of benefit to society dates from the mid-nineteenth century when in the United Kingdom "middle class reformers in the areas of education and urban welfare began to develop the idea that sport participation, appropriately directed, could be involved in the development of character, work discipline, teamwork, fair play and other socially approved characteristics" (Donnell 2007, 9). Today that concept is linked to development. Sport is thought of as a mechanism to ensure that the benefits of modernization are more equitably distributed than would be the case in its absence. Thus in 2002 Kofi Annan noted that "sport can play a role in improving the lives of not only individuals but whole communities" and he urged "Governments, development agencies and communities to think how sport can be included more systematically in plans to help children - particularly those who live in the midst of poverty, disease or conflict" (Olympic Aid 2002, np).

The concept of "sport-for-development," was conceived at a roundtable forum during the 2004 Athens Summer Olympic games. At that roundtable a handful of governments and representatives from the United Nations took as their mandate the integration of "sport and physical activity into their domestic and

international development strategies and programs" (Sport for Development & Peace 2008). Since then there has been, as Roger Levermore and Aaron Beacon put it, "a significant expansion in the use of sport (broadly defined) as a tool for initiating social change." They write, "this recent expansion of sport as an actor for social change, especially in what the World Bank classifies as low-income countries...is partially a result of the recognition that the orthodox policies of 'development' have failed to deliver their objectives." They continue, this has led many development practitioners to believe that there is a "...need for new strategies, methods and institutions and actors to assist delivery of far-reaching commitments, enshrined for example through the development aspirations presented as the UN MDGs [Millennium Development Goals] and the UNs Global Compact" (Levermore and Beacom 2009, 1).

Illustrative of this viewpoint are the remarks of Louise Frechett, then the UN Deputy Secretary-General. In his address to sport administrators in March 2007 he declared "you are a force for gender equality. You can bring youth and others in from the margins, strengthening the social fabric. You can promote communication and help heal the divisions between peoples, communities and entire nations" (Coulter 2009, 55).

Little of this renewed interest in sport as a means to achieve social progress is present as yet in Bangladesh because sport participation in that country is still quite limited. At the governmental level, there is a Ministry of Youth and Sports, but as a UNICEF report puts it "...unfortunately adolescents in Bangladesh do not have adequate access to sports and swimming for their healthy growth." UNICEF points out that "sports equipments are expensive for the general population. In the urban and semi urban areas adequate sports ground is not always available..." (UNICEF a).

This inadequacy is even more marked for girls than boys. In her discussion of a Bangladesh girl's karate project, Suzan Stoffers writes of girls in Bangladesh that "most of the young girls do not participate in sports or physical education at all. There are little (sic) examples from girls participating in sports at primary or secondary school, but after graduating or marriage girls stop practicing sports. In the rural areas of Bangladesh most girls are restricted to participate (sic) in any kind of sport, even during annual sports day. Many girls are not allowed to go to school that day because even watching is restricted" (Stoffers 2010, 17).

Because sport is so limited, there are only a few projects that attempt to use athletic participation to promote

progressive social change. One well known project involves BRAC, a Bangladesh NGO, organizing a girls' cricket team in Cox's Bazar, a port city in southeast Bangladesh. The effort is to use the sport to empower girls. A BRAC staff person is quoted as saying, "It was an impossible mission at the beginning. The idea of girls playing sport in public was readily rejected, especially by religious leaders who were initially opposed to such social change." BRAC however worked patiently to win over community leaders and "despite some heated debates, the ice eventually melted and the majority of parents, religious and community leaders agreed that girls too need to be engaged in outdoor sports activities to aid their physical and mental development." The Coordinator of the Project reported that though "it was not smooth sailing...we faced many obstacles and a lot of opposition, but in the end, the hardest part was selecting the final team members. We had so many enthusiastic girls interested in joining the cricket team, but ...we were forced to turn many down" (UNICEF b).

#### Sport and Development

Bangladesh's economic underdevelopment explains the limited sport participation in the country. Economic theory teaches that with growth, both household incomes and government revenues increase. With respect to sport participation this means that

when economic development occurs, individuals are likely to increase their purchases of sport equipment. At the same time, the increased tax revenue received by governments allows them also to undertake expenditures supportive of sport, for example with regard to providing sport facilities and sport in schools. The reverse is also the case. Underdevelopment means household incomes are low as are government tax revenues. Poor countries, in short, cannot afford extensive sport development. It is true that the extent to which a government funds sport is determined through the political process and therefore will vary according to the responsiveness of the state to the population's preferences. Nevertheless, separately and in combination, household income and public sector revenues - represent the principle determinants of sport participation in a country.

To test the validity of thinking about sport in this way it is desirable to undertake a cross-sectional analysis for poor nations in which a measure of sport participation is related to a statistic measuring economic development. A statistically significant positive relationship between the two would provide support for the hypothesis that even among low income nations, per capita output is an important determinant of the level of sport participation.

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A serious problem exists however in undertaking such a statistical analysis. Direct estimates of sport participation are unavailable for almost all low income countries. One data set that does provide extensive cross-country estimates of sport participation emerges from Eurobarometer surveys can be used in this regard (Brook 2011, 31). Though for the most part these surveys were undertaken in developed nations, they did include relatively low income countries, such as Romania, Croatia, Turkey, Malta and Latvia, are included. With this the case it is least plausible to argue that the inferences obtained from these data are useful in assessing the relationship between development and sport participation in even less developed nations.

In those surveys, respondents were asked how much physical activity they obtained from recreation, sport and leisure time activities in the previous week. They were provided with four choices: 1) a lot, 2) some, 3) little or 4) none. When those data are linked with per capita incomes, the results are unambiguous. The correlation coefficient relating per capita income and the level of sports participation is 0.707405 statistically significant at the 0.05 confidence level. Table 1, which groups the data by level of economic development, is graphic in showing the pattern. Sports participation in the

poorest of these countries stands at only about 30 percent of the population compared to over 50 percent in the countries with the highest levels of per capita income. Low income countries like Bangladesh do in fact tend to have low levels of sport participation.

Table 1

Percentage of Population Participating "A Lot" or Some in Physical Activity in Twenty Eight Countries Grouped by Income Level

	Above \$30,000 (10 Countries)	\$20,000–29,999 (7 Countries)	Under \$20,000 (11 Countries)
Percent	50.7	34.6	30.5

Source: Brook 2011, 31

That Bangladesh is a poor country is beyond doubt. When the country secured its independence from Pakistan in December 1971, its per capita GDP was the lowest in Asia, standing at \$497, compared to India's \$853 and Pakistan's \$954 (Maddison 2001, 304-5). It is true that since the 1990s, Bangladesh's economy has grown relatively rapidly, at a 4.8 percent rate in the 1990s and 5.9 percent during the 2000s (World Bank 2011, Tables 4.1 1.2). But even with this growth Bangladesh remains among the lowest income countries in the world, with an estimated per capita income of only \$1,550 in 2009 (World Bank 2011, Table 1.1). Because of this, almost half of the population (49.64

percent) in 2005 was living in poverty, defined as receiving income or engaged in expenditures at a level below \$1.25 per day (World Bank Povcalnet, n.d).

The growth that has occurred in Bangladesh largely has been propelled by a dramatic expansion of knitwear and ready-made garment exports. Between 1990/91 and 2004/05 those industries' exports increased seven-fold. These however are low productivity, labor intensive industries that stand at the lowest rung in the industrialization process. Aside from them, the largest concentration of the labor force remains in agriculture, working on very small units of production with rudimentary methods of production (Mahmud et al 2008,7).

#### Sport and Social Change

If Bangladesh were to experience sustained economic growth, it is likely that, following the experience of other nations, the level of sport participation in the country would increase. Left unanswered however is whether, if such an expansion of sport did occur, the progressive social change sought by the promoters of sport-for-development would be experienced. The simple fact of the matter is that no one knows. Indeed Coalter, who has written a series of articles reviewing the impact of such programs, is steadfastly agnostic. He writes that "...there is little systematic evidence about the impacts of ... sport-in-

development programmes." In part this is due to the fact that the environment in which sport-in-development projects are undertaken is "frequently not conducive to undertaking robust research." In addition, he goes on, there are "major methodological difficulties relating to measuring any outcomes of sport programmes" even when the circumstances to do measurement are favorable. This is because "many of the wide-ranging and ambitious claims being made in the policy rhetoric of sport-in-development pose... substantial issues of definition and measurement." In this regard Coulter approvingly cites R. Pawson's formulation that much of the policy rhetoric with regard to sport represents "ill-defined interventions with hard to follow outcomes" (Coulter 2009, 56). Coulter himself has suggested that the growth of sport-in-development is "based on sport's 'mythopoeic' status", which he defines as myths that "contain elements of truth but elements which become reified and distorted ...standing for supposed but largely unexamined impacts and processes" (Coulter 2007 9).

The fact that sport's development has not been shown to have the kind of payoffs its advocates claim for it however is not the same thing as saying that sport has no value. It may or may not result in greater community integration, or in the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, but it is a set

of activities that many people enjoy. The philosopher Colin McGinn overstates the case when he says that "sport is essential part of the good life, of the life worth living." Not everyone possesses the desire to participate in sport; those who do not may nevertheless experience a life worth living. But at the same time it is true that for many people throughout the world participating in sport is a pleasurable activity.

In a study of basketball in the Caribbean, Joan D. Mandle and I doubted that playing basketball either alleviated poverty or politically empowered individual basketball players. Further, we encountered many people who were indifferent to the sport and for whom "the sports existence at the grassroots is of little consequence." Nevertheless we also encountered many "who find exhilaration in displaying basketball skills in front of appreciate audiences, who enjoy the excitement and community sociability of league games, who simply like to compete with others on a basketball court or who find it attractive to organize and participate..." in the sport. For those people the sport was important because it provided an "enhanced opportunity for achievement and recognition, for expressiveness and enjoyment" (Mandle and Mandle 1994, 96).

What we found, in short, was that sport participation more nearly resembles an act of consumption than investment. It

provided gratification to the participants. They engaged in activities that were attractive to themselves. Seen in this way, sport does not require any justification over and beyond that. Doubts can be raised about whether sport assists in conflict resolution and community development as the sport-in-development advocates believe. But what is certain is that if incomes were to rise and poverty were reduced people would increase their sport participation. Doing so enables them to better satisfy their aspirations and fulfill the potential of their talents. Without taking into account spillover effects such as those identified by sport-for-development theorists, the growth in sport that would occur with economic growth represents an enhancement of individual empowerment.

#### Women's Empowerment

There is yet another issue that should be considered in the case of Bangladesh. There, women's empowerment is very low. The question that arises is whether if incomes increase and sport does development, women's empowerment too will advance. This issue arises because as June Larkin has put it, though it is true that in certain places and at certain times, sports fosters understanding and tolerance, it is also true that the opposite exists as well. She is right to argue that "sport is full of discrimination; it can be racist, divisive and can breed

intolerance and misunderstanding” (Larkin 2007, 94). The economy could grow, and sport prosper, but women might nonetheless remain unengaged in sport.

Table 2

Gross National Income per Capita (PPP Adjusted) and Gender Inequality Index 2011)

Region	Per capita Income	Gender Inequality Index
Europe and Central Asia	12,004	0.311
Latin America and Caribbean	10,119	0.445
Arab States	8,554	0.563
East Asia and Pacific	6,466	NA
South Asia	3,345	0.601
Sub-Saharan Africa	1,966	0.610

Source: United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report, 2011*, Tables 1 and 3

To examine this question, Table 2 provides information that includes the per capita income and the Gender Inequality Index (GII) developed by the authors of the Human Development Report for the developing regions of the world. The index itself is composed of a country’s maternal mortality ratio, the adolescent fertility rate, the percentage of parliamentary seats held by women, secondary education rates, the labor force participation rate and four measures of reproductive health.

What the table shows is that low incomes are generally associated with high levels of gender inequality. Put another

way, women's empowerment is positively associated with economic development. This positive relationship between development and gender equality, like the relationship between development and sport participation, is broadly consistent with economic reasoning. When economic development is experienced, major changes occur in a country's female labor force participation rate, the industrial structure of the female labor force and women's reproductive patterns. With modern growth, female labor force participation rates rise, the share of the labor force that works in agriculture declines, and the birth rate falls. In combination, all three enhance women's personal empowerment. Because they enable women to leave their households, together they tend to increase women's autonomy and independence.

In the case of Bangladesh, this form of structural change has however occurred only to a limited extent. While it is reported that in 2004, 1.5 million of the 1.8 million people employed in the garment industry were women, the fact remains that this modern work force experience was not typical (Kohsla 2009 18). In 2009, the female labor force participation rate was only 57 percent compared to 85 percent for men. In 2005 (the last year for which data are available) 68 percent of the women who were in the labor force were employed in agriculture (World Bank, databank). For most women, that is, the personal

empowerment that is derived from industrial and service employment had not been experienced.

Bangladesh's GII ranking that is consistent with the pattern that holds for gender inequality globally. As a low income country it is predictable that Bangladesh ranks among the countries with the highest level of gender inequality, standing at the 23<sup>rd</sup> percentile in the GII (112 out of 146 countries). Indeed, even this low ranking however probably understates gender inequality in Bangladesh. The GII does not include age of marriage, a sensitive measure of women's empowerment. In 2004 (the last year for which data are available) the mean age of marriage for Bangladesh was 18.7. Only Chad at 18.3, Mali at 17.8, Niger at 17.6, Sao Tome 17.8, Uganda at 18.2 were lower; Mozambique also stood at 18.7 (United Nations 2008, Table 4). A low marital age suggests that many women in Bangladesh are involved in arranged marriages at very young ages, a salient indicator of women's low status.

What this suggests is that the discrimination against girls and women in sport in Bangladesh is not an anomaly. It is consistent with a broad pattern of disempowerment experienced by women in the country. And that lack of empowerment is in its turn closely associated with the limited extent to which the country has experienced economic development. Bangladesh

economic underdevelopment goes a long way in explaining not only the subordinate status of women generally but also their absence within the country's sport community as well.

In sum, both the limited extent of sport participation and the discrimination experienced by women and girls in sport are causally connected to the country's underdevelopment. Because of the country's poverty, private and public budgets typically can accommodate only a constrained level of sport expenditures. At the same time, the fact that the country's economy has experienced only a limited degree of structural transformation has contributed to the persistence of women's subordination, a pattern that means that among the limited number of people who are able to participate in sport, only a small fraction are girls and women. However, if the country were to experience economic growth the reversal causal flow is likely to occur. Sport will likely emerge as a more important sector in Bangladeshi society. And at the same time, newly empowered women may be able secure an enhanced status within that expanding sport community.

#### Bangladesh Economic Growth

To date, Bangladesh's economic growth has been fueled by and dependent upon the garment and apparel sectors. Though the people who work in them earn more than in the alternative

employment opportunities available to them, compensation is at quite low levels. Indeed in July, 2010, *The New York Times* reported that Bangladesh "has the lowest garment wages in the world." With this the case, the country's recent economic growth, though substantial, has not sufficiently raised incomes to have much of an impact on either sport or women's empowerment.

What Bangladesh requires for sport participation to grow substantially and for women to become more personally empowered is a process of economic modernization over and beyond textiles. Bangladesh has to increase its technological capability far above its present level. A key bottleneck in this regard is the country's poor performance with regard to secondary education. While the primary school attendance rate for males currently stands at 80 percent and for females at 83 percent - respectable levels for a low income nation - the country's secondary school attendance rates are quite low. Secondary school attendance rates for males and females are only 46 percent and 53 percent respectively (World Bank 2011, Table x). These data point to the fact that by and large the Bangladesh labor force is not well enough educated to participate effectively in lucrative global markets. Unless and until Bangladesh achieves rising productivity and technological change, made possible by

increased levels of education attainment, the country will continue to reside near the bottom of global rankings of per capita income. With that, so too will sport participation and gender equality.

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