Many politicians believe that sport can be a powerful tool for reconciliation between peoples or states in conflict. But according to the Norwegian researcher Andreas Selliaas, this belief has never really been subjected to systematic scrutiny, and he has now embarked on a two-year project to find out if it is really true that sport can contribute to reconciliation.

The analysis project is a joint effort between Selliaas’ employer, The Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI) and the Rafto Human Rights House, also in Norway. In 2006, Rafto Human Rights House co-hosted a conference on reconciliation between North and South Korea that also discussed the role of the IOC in bringing the parties together. But it quickly became clear that NGOs, politicians and academics had greater interest than hard facts on the relationship between sport, peace and reconciliation.

“Despite heightened focus on sports both in foreign policies of states and within the UN, there has been little systematic research on the role of sports in reconciliation work. There is a lack of policy analyses of measures taken so far and there is little development of theories and academic work in the field,” Selliaas told delegates at Play the Game.

The Norwegian project will look at both international sports diplomacy at the inter-state level and people-to-people reconciliation initiatives. The analysis will try to identify the premises that should be in place in order to use sport as a means for reconciliation, and exactly what sport contributes to reconciliation processes.

At Play the Game, Selliaas presented some early findings from the project based on reviews of literature and newspaper articles about reconciliation projects and sports diplomacy, such as cricket diplomacy between India and Pakistan, baseball diplomacy between USA and Cuba and the Olympic diplomacy in the case of North and South Korea.

“At such an early stage it is hard to draw conclusions but it seems that all reconciliation initiatives come after a certain degree of political order has been established. NGOs play a central role in most initiatives also in sports diplomacy, and outside intervention is the rule in people-to-people reconciliation,” Selliaas explained.

He therefore believes that sport does not start reconciliation but it can be a valuable part of broader initiatives.

The findings of the project will be presented in a book to be published at the time of the Beijing Olympics in 2008.
Imagine being a sports journalist in a country where the government has issued a decree that sports journalists cannot leave the country. Imagine also that your colleagues are constantly under threat from being shot or detained by the government without trial and that sport in the country is as threatened as sports journalists. That country is Somalia. But even more surprising is that despite the lack of a stable political situation, a number of people have worked hard in recent years to keep sport alive in Somalia by maintaining sports bodies and rebuilding a National Olympic Committee.

Play the Game wanted to highlight this important story at its 2007 conference, and an invitation and a travel grant went out to Shafi ci Mohyaddin Abokar, first vice president and head of international relations of Somalia Sports Press Association, who has worked tirelessly to keep the international community informed about events in Somalia at great risk to his own life.

Over the past few years, Shafi ci has sent e-mail after e-mail to organisations like Play the Game and the International Sports Press Association detailing the ups and downs of sports and sports journalism that have become pawns in the country’s political power games. At the moment, the fortunes of sport are closely linked to the party that holds political power at any given time:

- For six months in 2006, the Islamic Courts Union ruled major parts of the country and declared sport a Satanic act and banned women and children from playing sports. The Union also banned sports broadcasts.
- In 2007, the interim government regained power in the country although Islamists remain a powerful opposition group. Sports are being played again but according to the Somali Sports Press Association, the government as well as the Islamists are wary of sport’s ability to create friendship and peace between members of segregated groups. The parties prefer divisions to remain strong.
- Yet, 17 national sports federations are members of the Somali Olympic Committee that in 2007 opened up five regional offices to assist with programmes to re-introduce sport in Somalia. The programmes are supported by the International Olympic Committee.

Unfortunately, Shafi ci never made it to Iceland. He was unable to leave Somalia due to the government decree that bars sports journalists and athletes from leaving the country without government approval. Should he have been able to leave, he would not have been allowed to enter Iceland that does not issue visas to residents of Somalia.

You can read Shafi ci’s English language reports on sport and sports journalism in Somalia on the website for the National Olympic Committee in Somalia (www.nocsom.org) and on the website for the International Sports Press Association (www.aipsmedia.com)
**Organising sport in the Australian outback is DIFFERENT**

In the outback six is a crowd and social dynamics are ignored at your peril

by Kirsten Sparre

Sport is good for the health of both individuals and small communities in the Australian outback. Organising sports activities in the bush is, however, an entirely different kettle of fish from doing it in the suburbs, as Garry Humphries will tell you.

Garry Humphries is regional manager for sport, recreation and racing in the South West Region of Queensland in Australia. At Play the Game he provided a fascinating insight into the special characteristics of organising sport in the outback.

A fundamental difference between the bush and the suburbs is one of scale. Australia has a population of 20 million people. 18 million of those live in cities dotted around the coastline and the remaining 2 million share an area in the middle the size of Europe. People are few and far between and for Humphries and his staff this means a lot of travel.

"Last year the six people in our team travelled the equivalent of three and a half times around the world to serve our area. Most of it by car because people tend not to take us seriously if we fly in," Humphries explained.

"The discovery of coal can lead to a booming industry but it may lead to small towns losing people with technical skills because they have gone to work in the mines and cannot repair lights at the sports grounds. In cities the impact of such a change can be absorbed, but that is not the case in the outback," said Humphries.

In general, it is a problem that local councils do not necessarily have people employed who are capable of building or maintaining sports facilities.

"The bush is perhaps getting more women active than in the suburbs, and it means that the audience you have to reach and the decision makers you deal with are more likely to be women. Therefore I sometimes start by closing deals with them," said Humphries.

With fewer people around, drawing a crowd also takes on an entirely different meaning. Getting 20 or even just six people together for a night with guest speakers in South West Queensland can get the same market penetration as a crowd in excess of 8,000 people in Brisbane.

"Once we had a sports medicine association that did not want to come and talk unless there were 25 people present. So I paid for 20 empty seats to get education for six people and that was a good deal," said Humphries who also invites Olympic level coaches and icons like Australian lifeguards to give talks in small towns far removed from the sea.

Environment is everything

The environment also plays a much larger role in the opportunities for organising sport in the outback than in the cities. Changes in the natural environment such as drought, fire, flood or storms affect everybody immediately and can have a direct impact on planned events because people need to attend to more immediate matters.

But also changes in the economic environment can have an impact on sport.

A local football match in the Australian outback, Darling Downs vs Crusaders. Photo: Kim & Chris Thomas (from the collection of Mrs Janet Addison)
People in the outback are generally a bit suspicious of government officials whom they compare to seagulls that fly in, squawk and shit all over the place before they leave again. For Humphries and his team this means that it is necessary to get to know people and the places they are attached to before doing anything else.

“In simple terms, don’t rock into town and organise a coaching clinic at the CWA centre without knowing that for the last 40 years all coaching clinics have been held at the Bowl’s Club,” said Humphries.

The concept of unbounded social relationship is also something sports organisers need to get their heads around.

“The social dynamic in the bush is so much closer and more complex in the suburbs. Everybody knows everybody, and if you fail to use these networks you cannot be effective.”

For that reason, Humphries does not bring in young people with specific sports skills as coaches. Instead he recruits local people:

“We cannot train somebody to have a connection with the local community, but we can teach local people sports skills,” Humphries concluded.

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“We cannot train somebody to have a connection with the local community, but we can teach local people sports skills,” Humphries concluded.
Athletes with a disability may be a common sight at Olympic Games in the future. It is one of the opportunities offered to people with disabilities in a new UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities where article 30.5 states that people with disabilities can participate in all sport on the basis of equality of opportunity.

There are 650 million people in the world with disabilities, and the new convention is the first convention on human rights to include the right to sport, explains Professor Mary A. Hums from The Center for the Study of Sport in Society at Northeastern University in the US.

Hums and her colleagues have played a key role in getting sport included in the convention that is still fairly unknown in the wider world. It was passed by the UN General Assembly in December 2006 and is in the process of being ratified by enough countries to enter into force officially.

Competing with able-bodied
The article on sport in the new convention is not primarily aimed at ensuring athletes with disabilities the right to compete against able-bodied athletes at the Olympic level but it is probably one of the issues that will help raise the profile and awareness of the convention.

There is for instance the case of the South African runner, Oscar Pistorius. Pistorius was born without the fibula in his lower legs and with other defects in his feet. He had both legs amputated below the knee when he was 11 months old but has gone on to set Paralympic world records in the 100, 200, and 400 meters.

Pistorius has defeated some able-bodied runners in his pursuit of attaining an Olympic qualifying time, touching off international debate over what constitutes disabled and able-bodied and whether his prosthetics are giving him unfair advantages.

The IAAF, athletics’ governing body, ruled in January 2008 that Pistorius’ prosthetic limbs give him an advantage over able-bodied opponents and therefore he cannot compete in the Olympics. Pistorius has appealed the decision to the International Court of Arbitration of Sport, and the new UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities may give him and others a new lever in the struggle to be allowed to take part in the Olympics.

A string of sports rights
Article 30.5 of the convention also specifies a number of other rights to sport for people with a disability such as the right:
- to be supported by the state
- to be recognised as equal to those without disabilities
- to participate at all levels and in all forms of sport— including sport with people without disabilities
- to participate in sport organised specifically for people with disabilities
- to enter and use sporting venues and facilities just like a person without a disability
- to have access to services from organisations working in the area of tourism, leisure and sporting activities

The convention also specifies that children with disabilities have the right to sport and play in and outside of school on an equal basis with other children.

Maybe the future Olympic Games will show athletes with disabilities, like South African Oscar Pistorius, competing against able-bodied athletes? A new UN Convention is the starting point. Courtesy of Ossur

Sport is now recognised as a human right for people with disabilities

New UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities could help athletes with disabilities to compete in the Olympics

by Kirsten Sparre

“If Carlsberg organised academic conferences it would be this one. Outstanding organisation and magnificent content.” Steve Greenfield, Department Academic Legal Studies, Westminster University, UK