

## **Sports as an Instrument of Development and National Cohesion: the Nigerian Experience**

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**Abstract:** Sports is globally regarded as having the ability to foster friendship and peaceful coexistence among peoples across such different barriers as skin colours, country of origin, religion, gender as well as social strata. Sport is a strong source of harnessing diversities that may exist in a political system for sustainable socio-economic and political development. Sports have been used by different countries as justifiable mechanism for foreign policy and a veritable vehicle for peaceful co-existence. However, just as sport is capable of promoting friendship, it can also be used as an instrument of development in same way as it can foster national cohesion especially in plural and heterogeneous societies. To that extent, this paper sets to establish the extent to which sports can be used to engender development. It relied on the qualitative method of gauging information to establish its case. The study reveals that, indeed sports has the potentials of promoting national cohesion in a clime that is fragmented along many divisive lines such as ethnicity, religion, language and many other centrifugal forces; it further reveal that sports can also engender development in all facets such that is will enhance the standard of living of the people. The paper suggests among other things that, there is the need for the government to synergize with the private sector in order for the people and the society at large to reap the benefits that lays in sports and in the sport industry.

**Keywords:** Sports; instrument; economic development; social cohesion; friendship; Nigeria

### **Introduction**

In our everyday lives and activities, we are attracted to one sporting events or the other; be it on television, newspaper, radio, social media or even physically; more often than not, we spend time talking about sports, particularly football. In contemporary times, our lives have been surrounded with one sporting activities or the other, this is made possible by the emergence of information revolution. Alluding to this view, Joseph (2006) posits that, “not just in the United States, but worldwide, sports is a major part of all societies and cultures... Sport, like business, education, socializing, and war, are all part of the real world.” There is no denying the fact that,

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over the years, sport has become a veritable tool of development, entertainment, source of livelihood and an agent of change that bond peoples across the globe. In a country like Nigeria where politics of ethnicity has become a norm, it has become a common sight to see people of different tribes and creed watch sporting events together without having recourse to tribal or religious sentiments. Nwankwo et al (2016: 41) observes that “sports in Nigeria has grown from a humble beginning as an entertainment and recreational part-time activity to a prominent phenomenon and a lucrative gold mine, breaking cultural differences among tribes and regions through its impart; and harnessing our diversities by its influence felt in all spheres of lives of the citizenry”.

Nigeria is a country riddled with political chauvinism, religious bigotry and ethnic prejudice but all these are always put aside as Nigerians, irrespective of their political affinity, religious commitment and or ethnic affiliation, are always in unison when it comes to sports, especially football. What separates them at that instance is usually the team they are supporting. Such routine considerations like quota system or federal character are not relevant in choosing representations for the country in international competitions. Capabilities take relevance over other considerations in the choice of those representing the country. Emeka et al, (2016:72) succinctly argue that, “One beautiful thing about sport is that it shelves the idea of political ideologies, ethnicity, or religion”.

Sport unites people from different parts of the world together, irrespective of their racial, cultural, religious or social economic backgrounds; putting away all other differences and collectively works towards a common goal. During any major sports championship, such as the Olympics, Commonwealth Games, All African Games or Nigerian National Sports Festivals, athletes come from different backgrounds to participate; they are brought to live together in one games village and compete as human on a level playing ground. This is usually the same in competitions relating to national competitions as Nigerians always act in unison in support of the national team or the country’s representatives. At this point, it does not matter if the representative is a Christian, Muslim or from any region or state of the country. The common interest is for Nigeria to be victorious.

Sport possesses unique attributes, which has the capacity to bring about the development and the sustainability of peace. As UNOSDP notes, people all over the world, are naturally attracted to sports than any other activity. This is due to the fact that when sport takes place on a correct note, it is assumed to be a fun and entertaining experience for everyone. Moreover, sport is naturally intended to

showcase as well as develop an individual's strengths. Thus, sports empower the individual person, as well as promote a positive outlook for the future, which is an essential component to achieving development (United Nations, 2013). Mandela (2006) alluded to this view when he noted that, "sports have the capacity to change the world." It is a very powerful weapon for positive change; it has the capacity to heal generational acrimony or bitterness among a people. It is on this premise that the National Sports Festival in Nigeria was established in 1973. As Odegbami (2020) notes, the National Sports Festival in Nigeria was introduced into the country's social fabric as one of the weapons designed to cushion the pain, bitterness and other fallouts of the 1967-1970 civil war. To that extent therefore, sports have the capacity to promote and sustain peaceful coexistence among a people of heterogeneous nature.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is anchored on the theory of functionalism as conceived by such scholars as David Mitrany (1888-1975). The thrust of the theory of Functionalism is centered on the need for cooperation of states and non-state actors across territorial boundaries in the international system. Accordingly, Mitrany (1943) posits that "the world of the twentieth century was characterized by growing number of technical issues that could be resolved only by cooperative action across state boundaries". Such issues, be it within and among state actors, could better be handled by highly trained experts or technicians in the concerned area rather than by politicians. The theory further posit that, the emergence of "technical issues" would lead first to the felt or perceived need for collaborative action that is devoid of political or conflictual content and therefore assignable to technical experts whose approaches were essentially based on apolitical consideration.

It follows that, just as the theory of functionalism emphasizes cooperation among a people or state actors to be able to solve societal problems, so also does sports enhances such cooperative tendencies and thus bonds a people or peoples of different background, tribe, religion and even colour. It is thus the friendship that sports 'helps' to create, that establishes and facilitate the spirit of oneness upon which cooperation along developmental lines are created. Generally, aside entertainment, sports are regarded as a source of inspiration and integration of individuals and societies. It promotes and builds values as well as tolerance and the spirit of forgiveness; thus, a society where there is high level of religious and ethnic diversity

and intolerance, sports has the capacity to build the much needed national goodwill that is capable of promoting unity in diversity to such level that will enhance national cohesion required to develop a society.

### **Attributes of Sports**

Sports, as contained in the International Olympics Charter, can cultivate peaceful attributes in three forms: Firstly, sports carves out space and time for putting conflicts aside (friendship and truce); secondly, sports treats people as equals under the rules of the game (justice and equality); and thirdly, it teaches people to tolerate and celebrate their differences (solidarity, tolerance, mutual understanding and non discrimination). Sports are globally known to possess some unique attributes such that enables the celebration of the essence of humanity. Sports, by implication, creates the atmosphere that enables such qualities as friendship that helps put humanity on same page, albeit momentarily, in its quest to play down on all the divisive issues and sentiments that divide mankind and thus reposition man for meaningful development. Sports create an atmosphere for the spirit of collectivism to thrive. In other words, sports promote the need and spirit of cooperation among a people or peoples of the world. Sport is universal and its universality status makes its practitioners to be universally acceptable and accommodated. It is this universal quality of sports that gives it the ability to break the barriers of race, religion and other divisive sentiments that exists in human societies.

In modern times, sports have however gone beyond mere physical activities and for entertainment purposes. Sports have become one very big money spinning industry that now serves as means of livelihood for many people and as means and source of development and hope for many societies the world over. It has also become a big platform for state actors to showcase their cultural values and creeds with the aim of achieving their national pride and objectives. Sports promote friendship and have the ability to engender and sustain peaceful coexistence among a people who otherwise were never friends. Sport is universal with the strong ability to connect different race and creed; it has the potential to inspire and motivate the capacity to divert violent behaviour and or capacity to promote peaceful relations. Alluding to this view, Odegbami (2020) posits that, “sports are a very powerful weapon. This is the reason Olympic Games were conceived and have been sustained as the only human social activity that has remained constant to its grand objective of global peace, unification of all people .... And extending the frontiers of physical and mental human

capacity,” by way of addition, sports also has the capacity to empower sportsmen and women and other categories of participants with huge financial benefits.

Sports can be used as a diplomatic tool to settle disputes among warring factions or promote friendships and or ‘palliative’ as alleviation against old acrimony after a major crisis. For instance, the National Sports Festival was established in 1973 and used to promote friendship, cushion the pains and bitterness that followed the avoidable civil war in Nigeria that ended in 1970. Similarly, the “Open Fun School Project” is another example of the capability of sports to provide the enabling platform for development of social networks between former warring communities in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Gasser & Levinsen (2004) posits that, since the inception of the grassroots programme in 1998, the youth football programme has brought together thousands of children from once enemy communities to play football together in a peaceful atmosphere.

As noted earlier, sports have the capacity to cut through divisive barriers in every human society; it is therefore a tool to prevent conflict and peace-building efforts across the globe. Sports activities are also known to foster the spirit of oneness, tolerance and thus promote social integration and reducing tension in communities the world over. It serves as, not only a means of entertainment, but also, for healthy and fulfilled lives and age barriers. Sports can be used to control crime in a society; this can be achieved if the government invests in sports by providing modern facilities in the entire neighbourhoods with some measure of incentives, the youths could redirect their energies into gainful sporting games. By so doing, their attention would have been re-directed to positive and gainful enterprise. To lay credence to this view, according to a programme organized by Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, SDP, (2005), in the slum of Medellin in Colombia, the result shows that there was a drop in criminal behaviour; while another in Brazil, in Segundo Tempo, sports showed children a way out of misery and violence. Thus, in the everyday life of man, the values and attributes that sport preaches are necessary for a peaceful coexistence and the development of human societies.

## **How Sports Engender Economic Development and Social Cohesion among a People**

In modern times, sports have gone beyond the level recreational and entertainment of both participants and fans, to one very big money spinning industry across the world. Thus, sports now have the capacity to contribute meaningfully to the economic development of a society. Sports has created additional sources of income to society through the manufacture of sporting goods such as sports wears, balls for soccer, tennis, rugby, base ball and other merchandise or franchise in the sports industry. The production of these materials generates millions of dollars annually in income for the manufacturing companies and creating millions of direct and indirect employments for millions of people across the world; and have led to the development of sport related services and infrastructure for the hosting of sport events. As Head (2006) notes, Sports equipment manufacturing is an estimated \$13.5 billion industry that is continually growing worldwide. It has also become a known fact that sport has become a major source of income for young people the world over. For instance, an average footballer playing in a major European league earns between 10 to as much as 600 thousand pounds sterling per week or even more; which is two million, four hundred thousand pounds per month or twenty-eight million, eight hundred thousand pounds annually. Furthermore, Nigerian footballers and other sports personalities like Kanu Nwankwo, Austine “Jay Jay” Okocha, Finidi George, Julius Aghahowa, Wilson Oruma, John Mikel Obi, Odion Ighalo, Ahmed Musa, Kelechi Iheanacho, Wilfred Ndidi and the new boxing sensation and world champion, Anthony Joshua and many others, have all made billions of naira from their active involvement in sports across the world. The earnings of sports men and women who ply their trades abroad and even at home have serve as a foreign exchange earner for the Nigerian economy. Most of these sports men and women have invested these monies in the local economy thus creating job opportunities for young men and women at home and also pay taxes to the government for doing business in the in the country; thereby contributing in dual fold to the economy.

On the other hand, sports, across Nigeria have created direct and indirect employment for so many persons, in both the formal and informal sectors of the economy. Such job opportunities comes in form of the establishment of match viewing centres, where people now pay to watch live foreign league matches and the selling of franchises of local and foreign league football idols to local fans. Betting business is another integral part of sports in recent times, which have come to stay. Its contribution span from payment of tax to both state and federal governments

thereby contributing to the local economy, it also creates direct and indirect employments to the locals. The use of sport as a means for attaining economic and infrastructural development and global as well as national cohesion is a strategy which has attracted support from different organizations including the Federation International Football Association, the International Olympics Commission, African Union, European Union, and United Nations. Sport is also considered to be a prominent part of the emerging ‘fourth pillar of development aid’ (Develtere & De Bruyn, 2009). The hosting of such sporting activities as the Olympics or the FIFA World cup have serve as a major source of infrastructural and economic development. A study carried “on the economic and social impact of hosting major sporting event” indicates that, a mega sporting event like a FIFA World Cup or the Olympics has a positive economic effect on the host country’s economy. In this case, France saw a significant positive impact through its employment, when she hosted the FIFA World Cup in 1998, Giraud (2014). In the context of the UN, the role of sport in development and national cohesion has long been recognized, and sport was officially incorporated into various activities geared towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals since 2000.

Sport provides a cost-effective instrument to meet many development and peace challenges, and help achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Sport is a vital ingredient to development and national cohesion, especially in a developing country like Nigeria. As politically divided, ethnically as well as religiously diverse as Nigeria is; the only thing that seems to bring Nigerians on the same page and in one bonded spirit is sports. It has been observed over time that, anytime any of the Nigerian football teams, whether the Golden Eagles, Flying Eagles, the Dream team, the Super Eagles or any of the female national teams are playing Nigerians, from all walks of life and across strata of the society, usually queue in massive support of the Nigerian national teams. This is irrespective of the region, religion or state of origin of the players, what becomes important and uppermost in the minds of Nigerians at that time is for the team to excel and bring the trophy home. Thus, sports generally and football in particular unites Nigerians more than anything else. The effect of sports have been so powerful as well as impactful on the unity and integration of the Nigerian state that Awosika (1992) cited in Okediji (2015) notes that “Sports, be it soccer or any other game has cut across all barriers; ethnic, religion or racial and has served as a symbolic dialogue in developing the youths. Great Countries of the world have used sports to develop their youths in a way and manner that science, religion and politics have failed to achieve”. Onifade, (2001) further posits that Nigeria experienced prestige, status and respectability, when her soccer team won the maiden

edition of the under sixteen junior world soccer championship in China in 1985. It was also the same when Nigeria won the Under-sixteen soccer championships 1993, 2007, 2014 and 2016. As a result, the players became instant celebrities and thus moved from no income earners to become instant millionaires; and the image and prestige of Nigeria soured among the comity of nations. Most of the players who won these various championships for Nigeria later won lucrative contracts with European club sides where they are paid huge wages, thus, earning foreign exchange for the local economy back home.

### **Conclusion**

In present times, sports have emerged as a vital component of the social and economic development and growth of a country. Such that the active participation in sports stands to enhance the community health and productivity of the people; it also reduces medical expenses, imbibes discipline in character, generates greater leaders and thus enhances the chances of social cohesion among a people. To that extent therefore, practical experiences have shown that sports have the capacity to promote unity in heterogeneous society for the sustainable social and economic development. Sports have been used by different countries, including Nigeria, as justifiable mechanism for foreign policy and a veritable vehicle for peaceful co-existence. Nigerians love sport, they live and breathe sports; besides the love for sports however, Nigeria is endowed with so many talented sports men and women. It is therefore not surprising that sports, particularly football, has gone a long way in uniting a rather politically divided country than anything else. The fact that the missionaries used sport to achieve their purpose of reaching out to Nigerians in the colonial era is a testimony to the extent that sport is perceived as a positive agent of development over the years.

Sport, to an average Nigerian, is a way of life and a source of hope for a better nation. The level at which Nigerians throng from all walks of life to converge at location for sporting activities or events bear witness to this; more so when ethnicity, political rivalry and religious bigotry are shelved aside for the sake of sporting events. Nigerians are dynamic people who can easily get carried away by sport, especially football. There is no better way to achieve development and national cohesion in a multi-tribal nation like Nigeria other than through sport; considering the disposition of many Nigerians towards sports.

**Recommendations**

It is obvious from the above analysis that, sport is to the average Nigerian what blood is to man and it is the oil required to grease the engine of the society. However, for the Nigerian state to fully benefit from the potentialities of sports, the following suggestions are put forward:

The government should endeavour to put a deliberate sports policy in place to, among other things, encourage sports development at the grassroots, particularly in primary and secondary schools across the country; and to build private investor confidence in the sector so as to fully participate in the business aspect of sports in order to make it more attractive as well as economically rewarding for young men and women to build their career upon. Through the various policies, government should limit its role only to the aspect of regulating every aspect of sports and thus provide a level playing grounds for sports to thrive; and not being a major player in all aspects of it as the prevailing order portrays.

The government, through its rural and urban planners, should encourage the building of fields/sport grounds where sporting activities can take place in and around dueling places in both rural and urban areas. This will encourage young men and women and even neighbours to get actively involved in sports and to get more accustomed to one another for health and security purposes. This will also go a long way to reduce the rate of crimes and all forms of juvenile delinquencies in the society.

The bi-annual National Sports Festival which was established in the 1973 – that is immediately after the Nigerian civil war, to promote as well as engender the spirit of unity and oneness and thus national cohesion among Nigerians across all divides. This is to ‘help’ heal the country of the scars of the unfortunate civil war that lasted from 1969 to 1970. However, years down the line, the National Sports Festival seems to have lost its focus and bearing, such that it is now a near shadow of itself. Thus going forward, there is the need for the Festival to be properly organized and funded to meet the original aim of encouraging national unity. This can be achieved if the government allows full private sector involvement, such that the government’s role would be limited to that of merely regulating and providing the enabling environment.

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