

'Africa is so cool': soccer as development education

A tour by a Liberian youth football team did more to raise development awareness and action in the UK than many more formal development education projects. **Jo Kitterick** of CAFOD describes how young people of both countries have benefited from the visit.

Perhaps soccer is one of the basic ways in which conditions of radical desocialisation can be reversed. Perhaps only in a post industrial society could such a simple possibility be neglected in favour of the more popular notion that rich and settled 'tribal' loyalties are a cause of soccer violence.

Paul Richards (1997) came to this conclusion whilst observing young ex-fighters in Sierra Leone and Liberia gathered together to play football in the early 1990s.

In September 1999, CAFOD hosted the visit of a young, street-based, soccer squad, Millennium Stars, from the Liberian capital of Monrovia. Recruited by two older teenagers after peace had been declared, soccer has been a key component in encouraging the participation and leadership of young people in reconstructing civil society in Liberia. The squad had all been directly affected by the seven-year civil war and some had been recruited as child soldiers in the conflict.

The squad is like a family; we look after each other. Part of the commitment is to live a healthy life, and that means giving up criminal activity, drug abuse – respecting ourselves as well as others. (Mulbah Kpaiwolo, Young Team Coach, interview 1998)

Two young press attachés also accompanied the team and conducted regular interviews, feeding back information to Monrovia's radio station with the latest results of matches and impressions of the UK.

In our role as UK development educationalists we identified four challenges in working with young people:

- How do we engage young people and youth workers in a passion for a global agenda, when the nature of young people's activity in voluntary education is becoming increasingly fragmented and short term?
- How do we practically explore action where young people can make a difference? How do we work to demonstrate the need to learn from countries of the 'South' without compromising the need to act for justice?
- How do we work on an education project involving a youth work project from Liberia that ensures equal emphasis on learning outcomes for all partners?

Soccer was a clear starting point. Soccer is the one occasion when Brazil is the world leader and the United States the 'developing' nation. Here was an opportunity to challenge stereotypes of helplessness often portrayed by NGOs. Paul

Richards, in his paper, 'Soccer in War-Torn Africa' (1997) points out:

The advantage of soccer is not just its general popularity, but also as a cheap and universal team sport it has a social character without specific social reference. It is nobody's game, but everybody's.

All of our experience confirmed the established research that many youth leaders had little confidence in working on global issues with young people. Instead of inviting youth leaders to participate in a development education project, the starting point was an invitation to help organise a football match. Seventy per cent of leaders involved in the process had never participated in global education training. Thirty per cent had never even participated in any formal youth work training. By committing themselves to the preparation work necessary for the football matches and skills training sessions, youth leaders participated in global youth work training sessions and explored cultural similarities and differences, the causes of social, economic and political instability of Liberia and West Africa. Issues of competition, identity, teamwork, exclusion and inclusion through sport locally and globally also featured in preparation sessions with both young people and youth leaders.

Nine months of preparatory work took place with UK hosts, Liberian guests and a far wider set of contacts who assisted in part of the education process, but did not meet the team. We identified ways in which the project would meet core education targets for each youth network. However, this made the visit itinerary less flexible and it became difficult to cut parts of the programme whilst on tour.

- The Refugee and Migrant Workers Forum in London used the visit to bring young people from the Sudanese, Somali and Eritrean communities together for the first time for a match against the Millennium Stars. The young people have recently negotiated a free football pitch space and are in the process of setting up their own football project.
- The tour involved young education under-achievers from South London who volunteered their spare time to work on an arts project and helped contribute to CAFOD's national magazine.
- The Depaul Trust in Newcastle used the visit as an education exercise with homeless young people in social skills, budgeting, cooking and hosting guests.

A key hope for the project was to involve those not usually interested in global issues. Although just over half of the



young people involved in the visit had heard about CAFOD and its work, none had been involved in project work directly. Once again, inviting young people to plan a world football encounter was a natural starting point for engagement. Expressing opinions about world aspects of the sport, the African game, belonging, teamwork, fair play etc. naturally progressed to issues of causes of conflict and injustice on a global stage. Young women as well as young men participated in debates about competition and co-operation and participated in games and skills training. Artwork was used as a way of tracking young people's attitudes before and after the visit. Images of Africa at the beginning of the project were entirely negative and moved to startlingly powerful and dynamic depictions during and after the visit.

We were expecting a group of lads that were worlds apart from our own culture and personalities. We presumed that when they came, we would be overwhelmed with pity for them and although it was an excellent opportunity for us to reflect on what we do have, we actually feel nothing but admiration. (Clare and Liz, 16, Manchester, CAFOD 2000)

The groups we worked with commented that they found it difficult to see how posters and publications from development NGOs and other agencies helped to challenge strongly enough the overwhelmingly negative images of the 'South'. Members of the soccer team were invited to challenge us with their impressions of the images CAFOD uses to communicate its work.

Our follow-up work with our UK contacts since the visit shows that people are engaging with global issues beyond a sports agenda. For example, a number of youth groups have looked at issues affecting heavily indebted poor countries and there have been numerous requests to learn more about causes of the recent conflict in Sierra Leone by those who were involved in the soccer visit. Interest in volunteering on justice and peace issues has also significantly increased.

The drive behind the project came as much from the partner as from CAFOD, based on an education/advocacy agenda. Partnership was based on the space and trust for the partner to say: 'In terms of development, what's in it for us?' The Millennium Stars team planned what they wanted to learn and what they wanted share, not only with other young people, but with the UK national and local press. The two young press attachés also 'grilled' a British Government minister about the sale of arms to African countries! Research commissioned by DFID (2000) indicates that 83 per cent of school children find out what is happening in 'developing' countries through television. We set out, with the young people involved, to communicate a positive 'story'. Young people involved in the media coverage expressed delight at using their power to influence the news.

For many, direct engagement through, for example, skills training sessions, presented a dynamic image of countries of the South. One young black girl from Surrey, after a day with the team, concluded that: 'Africa is so cool.'

Since their return to Liberia, team members have set up community sports teams for younger children, they have won respect throughout the wider community and have used the teams as a way of raising issues of child protection with a range of decision makers in Liberia as well as with children. Players have been interviewed on Monrovia-based radio stations and videos of the visit have been shown on national television.

We know that those here who met the team were moved, challenged and inspired. We believe that their commitment to justice and their confidence in bringing the issues affecting Africa to their own communities has significantly strengthened. We are now working on the follow up that youth leaders and young people are demanding of us in acting for change on a global agenda. And we hope CAFOD is changing as a result.

■ **Jo Kitterick** is responsible for the Youth Programme at CAFOD, the official overseas development agency of the Catholic Church in England and Wales

References

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