

Sports as a Veritable Tool for Economic Empowerment and Elimination of Youth Restiveness in the Niger Delta Region of Nigeria

Jeroh, Eruteyan Joseph⁺

Department of Physical and Health Education, Delta State University, Abraka

(Received April 19 2007, accepted November 2 2007)

Abstract. This paper took a look at the possibilities of using sports to combat youth restiveness and channel their excess energies into productive ventures. Sport was defined and benefits accruing from sports participation were also highlighted. Participation in sports benefits not only the individual but also the schools and the society. To realize the objective the author recommends the need for an aggressive drive for the provision of facilities for certain sports which will find the topography of the area conducive. Multi-national companies are called upon to help in this regard to happily engage the youths. Through effective participation those who excel can easily get employment in the various sports segments to pry their trade.

Key words: Sports, Economic Empowerment, Elimination

1. Introduction

The Niger Delta Region has been a zone of one form of crisis or the other for quite some time now. The crises are either inter-ethnic, intra-ethnic, hostage taking or oil pipeline vandalization. In all these, the youths have been accused of excessive show of militancy. There is no smoke without fire. All these squabbles have a bottom line cause-idleness occasioned by unemployment caused by the strangulating jackboots of military invaders that gang-raped Nigeria for over 30 years. The area is made up of a people plagued by wars, disease, bad government, corruption, poverty and most importantly hopelessness in the midst of plenty.

The God-given resources of the region have been exploited and used to develop other parts of the country to the utter neglect of the region. This position is likened to killing the goose that lays the golden egg. The constant ethnic squabbles in the area have been a source of concern to government and many well-meaning individuals. The situation has caused many companies to relocate particularly from Warri and environs thus increasing the army of unemployed youths and hence the unassailable increase in crime wave. How do we disband the militant youths and channel their useful energies into productive use? Economic empowerment brought about by employment is the answer. This paper attempts to look at sports as a veritable tool for economic empowerment and elimination of youth restiveness in the Niger Delta.

2. Meaning of Sports

Many people use the terms “sports” and “games” interchangeably. Games, though involve physical exertion of energy by the participant, do not have laid down rules to guide participants. Sports, on the other hand, have rules. Coakley (1994) defines sport as an institutionalized competitive activity that involves vigorous physical exertion or the use of relatively complex skills by individuals whose participation is motivated by a combination of the intrinsic satisfaction associated with the activity itself and the external rewards earned through participation. Siedentop (1994) also sees it as a physically active, competitive game that has become highly institutionalized. He adds that sport has rules, histories, records and governing bodies. Sports and games can be participated in playfully.

3. Benefits of Sports Participation

⁺ e-mail: jeroh4laff@yahoo.com, Phone: +2348038815809, +2348028336086

The benefits accruing from participation in sports can be enjoyed by the society, schools and individuals. Several authorities agree in their explanations of the roles of sport in society. They generally regard sport as a social institution that faithfully teaches and reinforces esteemed societal values, thereby contributing to socializing athletes into the major cultural, social and behavioural patterns of the society in which they live. Eitzen and Sage (1986) say that in this way, sport contributes to the development, stability and future progress of the particular society. Sport also serves as a unifying factor or force for the society. Nigerians, regardless of education, occupation, tribe or religion unite to back the super eagles once there is any major competition. The race for Japan/Korea 2002 World Cup is a case in point. The 8th All African Games “Abuja 2003” brought the nation together in unison in spite of all the brouhaha in the country courtesy of deregulation of the downstream sector of the oil industry. Sports provide actions in an otherwise humdrum world. They not only provide excitement but also fantasy and escape. According to Kempton (1971) “the prime social function of sport is to unite us in the feeling that we are all still in high school”. Sports also have positive consequences for the schools and colleges. All organizations must have minimal amount of unity. Members must give an organization some allegiance for it to survive. Allegiance can stem from pay, ideology, chance for promotion or cooperative need to accomplish a collective goal. Schools, however, do not have the usual means to motivate their members. Aside from athletic contests, schools do not have collective goals, only individual ones. Any activity that promotes loyalty to the school serves a useful and necessary purpose (Eitzen & Sage, 1986).

Interschool sports competition is a means of unifying the entire school. Different races, social classes, fraternities, teachers and students unite for a common cause – the defeat of a common enemy outside the group. Potentially hostile segments of the school are often kept from fragmenting the school by athletics. Schools morale can also be lifted through the collective following of an athletic team, thereby serving to unify the school. Remember that institutions like the great Hussey College, Warri, Government College, Ughelli, Urhobo College, Effurun and Notre Dame College, Ozoro of the late 60’s and early 70’s had great followers from both the schools and the society because of their exploits in sports. Teams representing a school provide a rallying point for persons who though otherwise be only loosely identified with the school (Reston, 1966). This often increases monetary support for the school especially during inter-house athletics sports meetings. School administrators could manipulate students through sports thus performing some social control function. Athletic activity may make students more tractable because it draws off their surplus energies (catharsis theory). For athletes and non-athletes alike, sport furnishes a diversion of attention from undesirable to desirable channels. It gives them something to think about and something to do with their time, thereby keeping them from mischief and from questioning the system (Eitzen & Sage, 1986). They aver that athletes, because they must obey school rules and training rules if they want to compete, serve as examples of good behaviours. Schools want individuals to follow rules, to be disciplined, to work hard, to fit in-sport accomplishes these. The benefits accruable to the individuals are numerous. Through sports participation, the individual develops physical, mental, social and emotional stability but the thrust of this discourse is on the economic gains of sports and the elimination of youth restiveness in the Niger Delta region.

Sport is believed to be meritocratic because persons with talent, regardless of social background, are upwardly mobile. Irrespective of educational background we are all living witnesses to the exploits of Nigerian footballers, basketballers and boxers in Europe and Asia. Through sports they have become millionaires. The crop of Deltans in the Nigeria’s National Football team such as Oliseh, Okocha, Agali, Akpoborie, Oruma, and Ikpeba are prominent among these millionaires. There is no way this group can be found in crime and wanton destruction of properties because they are comfortable economically. They have “arrived” on the economic platform. Commercial interests also use successful sportsmen to advertise their products and this attracts a lot of money to the sportsman. During the preparation for the 1994 World Cup, Cadbury (Nig) plc used Stephen Keshi and Rasheed Yekini (both Nigerian National Footballers) to advertise Bournvita. Pepsi used Austin Okocha to advertise its product while Oliseh is prominent with the Western Union Money Transfer advertisement of Union Bank (Nig) Plc. A lot of money accrues to these illustrious sons of Nigeria through these appearances.

Once you showcase your talents, with dedication and discipline you will surely emancipate yourself from financial doldrums. Our own Victor Ikpeba, a prolific foreign-based footballer is the spokes-person for Rhythm African, a Division of Kess Laban, CEO/Wardrobe Consultant House of Jabari, Lagos (The Comet Sunday June 17, 2001). Jonathan Akpoborie (a prominent Nigerian footballer) has a shipping agency. The money for this business came through sports, (football). Many career opportunities are open for the successful sportsman/woman. You can take to coaching, organizing, sports journalism/broadcasting,

groundsmanship, officiating, sports medicine, sports marketing/promotion, etc (Jeroh, 2000). A job in any of these areas guarantees you a good life.

4. How to Realize the Objective

In order to realize the lofty objective of using sport for the economic empowerment of our youths, and the elimination of youth restiveness, there is the need for an aggressive drive for the provision of facilities for the development of the following sports which will find the terrain of the Niger Delta useful: beach handball, beach football, beach volleyball, rowing/canoeing, swimming, basketball and wrestling. The rivers which dot the nooks and crannies of the region could be dredged to provide the beaches while recreation centers should be developed and provided with facilities to cater for basketball and other sports. Government and its parastatals such as the Niger Delta Development Commission (NDDC) as well as corporate organizations should endeavour to co-operate to provide the facilities. The equipments needed for the development of the aforementioned sports are not difficult and expensive to procure. The Shell Petroleum Development Company (SPDC-West) in 2001 started the crusade of engaging the youths in fifteen local government areas where it has operations in Delta State in swimming, handball and track and field athletics. There is the need, however, for continuity of this programme. Other multi-national oil companies should be made to emulate the good gesture of SPDC-West by developing and promoting other sports in the area. It is the considered view of the author that the provision of these facilities and coaches to oversee these sports will go a long way towards engaging the youths in meaningful ventures. Talents discovered would be taken over by the sports council for grooming and subsequent representation of the state(s) in competitions locally and internationally. Some talents that were discovered in the Shell programme in 2001 creditably represented Delta State in the 12th National Sports Festival "Edo 2002". They are all equally employed now by the State Sports Council to pry the trade (sports) they know very well.

5. Conclusion

Regular engagement of youths through sports will develop interest and awareness in the efficacy of sports as a tool for economic empowerment and reduction/elimination of youth restiveness. No efforts should be spared in the provision of facilities for the development of the aforementioned sports. A conducive atmosphere would encourage youths to engage themselves in sports. Participation in sports will lead them to gainful employment. Once a people are gainfully employed it becomes difficult to be involved in vandalism through restiveness. The emphases on success, individual competition, hardwork, discipline and order and on the necessity for submerging individual efforts for the good of the team or the society are integral to business creed. Given this identity in values, it is not surprising that many successful athletes have been driven into the business world.

6. References

- [1] Coakley, J. J. Issues and Controversies. *Sport in Society*. St Louis: C.V. Mosby. 1994.
- [2] Eitzen, D. S. , Sage. H. G. *Sociology of American Sports*. Dubuque Iowa: WmC. Brown Company. 1986.
- [3] Fordham, S. L. , Leaf, C. A. An Introduction to Alternative Careers. *Physical Education and Sports*. New York: John Wiley and Sons. 1978.
- [4] Hurd, R. D. Sociology – A Way of Looking at Human Societies: *An Introduction to Sociology*. London: Routledge and Kegan. 1973.
- [5] Jeroh, E. J. Developing Career Options for Girls in Sports. A Paper presented at the 5th Annual National Conference of Nigerian Association of Women in Sports (NAWIS). Asaba: 29th November-1st .2000,12.
- [6] Kempton, M. Jock – Sniffing. *New York Review of Books*. 1971.
- [7] Nixon, J. E. and Jewett, A. E. An Introduction to Physical Education. 9th ed. Philadelphia: Saunders College. 1980.
- [8] Reston, J. Sports: Therapy with Fun. *New York Times*. 1966, 6.
- [9] Siedentop, D. Introduction to Physical Education, Fitness and Sport. 2nd ed. *Mountain View*. California: Mayfield Publishing Company. 1994.