

Written evidence submitted by Dr. Claire Jenkin (SFT0068)

Information on the respondent

I am a Senior Lecturer in Sport Development at the University of Hertfordshire, with nearly 20 years of global experience in sport development. This commentary is given in a personal capacity and reflects my personal opinion as an academic researcher and practitioner.

In this submission, the following questions are considered:

- What are the UK's soft power strengths, with reference to diplomacy, post-conflict reconstruction, culture, the media, the economy and education? How is the UK perceived overseas? In what ways does this perception differ regionally or by country?
- What role do regional and international organisations play in bolstering the UK's soft power offer? How might the UK build partnerships and alliances with these organisations to achieve its soft power goals?

This submission is largely based on an ongoing research project, comparing sports diplomacy between the UK, Australia, Japan and the USA, conducted in collaboration with Professor Carrie Le Crom (Virginia Commonwealth University, USA), Aya Noguchi (Seijo University, Japan), Dr. Verity Postlethwaite (Loughborough University, UK) and Professor Emma Sherry (RMIT University, Australia). It largely focuses on how those working in sport understand and enact diplomacy/soft power on the global stage through their programmes and events. In short, how sports diplomacy works in practice.

Summary

- Sport is a powerful soft power tool but without fully engaging and supporting those who work in sport, the UK is unlikely to maximise its potential.
- While the UK undertakes some excellent sports diplomacy programmes, it is often ad hoc and not always well coordinated/connected. The research suggests that the UK develops a sports diplomacy strategy, with the flexibility for the sector to develop context specific programming.
- Those working in sport often dislike traditional terminology, such as soft power or diplomacy, as the terminology is not perceived as cooperative. Rather than positioning diplomacy as a verb, the best forms of diplomacy are mutually collaborative and where outcomes are co-produced.
- Partnerships are a key element of good and fruitful diplomacy.

1. What are the UK's soft power strengths, with reference to diplomacy, post-conflict reconstruction, culture, the media, the economy and education? How is the UK perceived overseas? In what ways does this perception differ regionally or by country?

Sport is a powerful tool of soft power and a real strength for the UK. However there are numerous considerations needed to fully maximise this and it is important to review these to better understand this strength.

1.1 Firstly, many of those working in sport don't always understand what diplomacy is, how it relates to their roles and also how to be a good diplomat. If the UK wants to maximise the reach that sport can bring, it needs to engage with those working in sport on the front line, to support them to understand how their work relates to diplomacy. It also needs to train those in the sector on how to be diplomats. One USA interviewee likened those working in international sport to being citizen ambassadors, suggesting that training for those in this sector should be similar to more formal, traditional diplomatic roles.

1.2 Another consideration is that despite the potential that sport has to be a strong diplomatic activity, there appears to be a language issue that needs to be resolved. The research has suggested that many in the sector felt uncomfortable with this notion of unequal power and explicitly doing diplomacy to others, particularly when working with those in middle to low-income countries. They felt that phrasing sporting programmes as diplomacy, is positioning diplomacy as a verb (i.e. to do diplomacy to you), whereas many of those working in sport want diplomacy to be an outcome instead. Similarly the phrase 'soft power' was not welcomed by interviewees across the four countries, with quotes including "the concept of soft power is still a form of power" and "I'm not keen on the word soft power...there's nothing soft about what we do, it's active diplomacy and active influence and active development work".

In Japan, the phrase 'international cooperation' is used instead of diplomacy/soft power, as they felt it was more collaborative and less paternalistic, so this should be considered in the UK. Similarly, as mentioned previously, using phrases such as citizen ambassadors are more likely to be welcomed by those in sport.

A final key aspect of language is that there is no universal definition of what sports diplomacy is. Therefore there is a need for the UK to define what diplomacy/soft power/international cooperation through sport means for them and ensure this is co-produced by those working in the industry.

1.3 There was a recognition among those who work in sport from the UK that historically, there has been a credibility issue, with perceived arrogance and colonial legacies. What was pleasing from this research is that this was recognised and programming was being developed collaboratively by practitioners to mitigate this historical issue. However interviewees suggested that this wasn't always the case for policymakers (particularly relating to the Commonwealth), so this is a key consideration to ensure the UK is perceived well overseas. Again it was felt that sport could really be the leader in this space to change this image and using appropriate terminology (as previously mentioned) and approaches are key aspects of this.

1.4 A real strength of UK sports diplomacy is that it is often context specific, to address needs and opportunities that arose in different settings. However the research also showed that there was an overall lack of national ownership and directive, which does hinder potential impact. It is pleasing that this is being considered as part of the DCMS led working group on sports diplomacy. However the research suggests that a sports diplomacy strategy with clear ownership and direction would be beneficial, while still enabling context specific programming.

2. What role do regional and international organisations play in bolstering the UK's soft power offer? How might the UK build partnerships and alliances with these organisations to achieve its soft power goals?

2.1 For the UK, one of the major international partnership opportunities come through the Commonwealth. As one of our interviewees in this study suggested, “sport is the only way people think of the Commonwealth”. If the UK wants to strengthen its ties across the Commonwealth, particularly in the current geopolitical landscape, then sport can be a key facilitator for this. It is important to note that this could be through elite sporting events but also through grassroots sport for development, as discussed in 2.2. However heed must be taken by policymakers to ensure that the credibility issues discussed in 1.3 are fully recognised and not reinforced.

2.2 Collaborative partnerships with well-respected regional and international organisations are key to enact good sports diplomacy. The UK should consider the type of sports diplomacy it wants to do and this in turn, will impact the regional and international partners it engages with. In UK sports diplomacy, there is a major focus on international sporting events, which some evidence suggests can have mixed longer-term impact. This is not to suggest pivoting away from that but to also consider other forms of sport through which to diplomatically engage. Other countries, particularly Australia, also have a major focus on working with those in sport for development to pursue some of their diplomacy outcomes. While many UK based organisations often do excellent sport for development work internationally, there is no strong, unified drive to embrace and support this as diplomacy related activity. Meaning this very localised, grassroots focus on using sport to improve societal outcomes is often an under-utilised area of focused sports diplomacy for the UK. Therefore it would be beneficial to work with these sport for development organisations (in addition to relevant international organisations, such as the International Olympic Committee), to support their work in a more coordinated, directive way as part of a future sports diplomacy strategy. The UK could learn from Australia (through the Team Up programme) on how to do this well.