The Golden Triangle's forgotten children: Using football to support the social development of the extra-national youth population of Thailand, Myanmar and Laos

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Abstract

The Golden Triangle is a reference to the intersection of three countries, namely Thailand, Myanmar and Laos. The area has long been associated with the production and trafficking of opium, and several mountainous ethnic groups have previously relied on drug trading to support their families. However, the extensive attempts to terminate drug cultivation and trafficking activities from various international and domestic organisations has forced many to search for alternative sources of income. For some, this has involved human trafficking for exploitative purposes, particularly relating to labour, sex and warfare. Children have often been the primary commodities in this industry, many from ethnic minorities and denied citizenship leading to greater vulnerability. Several non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have attempted to address the issue of the exploitation of extra-national youths. This article explores the role and nature of NGOs, and in particular Childlife Mae Sai which is a small organisation set up to meet the needs of young people. The paper focuses on an international football-based social development programme operated through this NGO. Four British football coaches and four locally-based staff members were responsible for implementing and overseeing the programme. Each of them was interviewed for this research, and their perspectives are explored here. The initiative is examined in relation to objectives, logistics, challenges, outcomes and limitations. Respondents noted the utility of football as a tool to promote social development, particularly in relation to behavioural issues. However, the project was limited by the lack of time, resources and funding. Although this programme does not serve as a complete model for projects of this nature, it does provide for meaningful analysis of the suitability and limitations of football in this social context.

Introduction

The Golden Triangle region of South East Asia refers to the mountainous areas of the Kingdom of Thailand, the Union of Myanmar (previously known as Burma) and the Lao People’s Democratic Republic (Laos), the mapped borders of which form a triangular shape. The term “golden” relates to the prevalence of the often illegal cultiva-
tion of opium poppies, and the subsequent smuggling activities in this region (Mogg, 2006). Some commentators suggest that this collective term for the area was first employed in the early 1970s. It has since become popularly employed as a reference to the poppy growing regions which came to invoke a vision of the lawless allure of opium and its lucrative trade (Renard, 1996). There are claims that small amounts of opium were cultivated in this region during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Tribal groups migrated south and settled in this region from the mountains of southern China. They arrived equipped with agricultural expertise, particularly regarding opium poppies (Chouvy, 1999). Opium production in this region extended during the twentieth century, as international demand for the drug increased. The enhanced distribution of this profitable “cash crop” was partly facilitated by the area’s permeable borders, notably along the Mekong River. As the hilly and mountainous regions provide the most conducive environment for opium poppy cultivation, the ethnic minority hill tribes assumed the role of growing and cultivating the crop (Mogg, 2006). In the 1970s UN prohibitionist models led to the various national and international programmes to reverse these hill tribes’ reliance upon opium cultivation and use (Lyttleton, 2004). The prohibition had serious implications for the ethnic minorities in the area. The previously extensive drug trade network resulted in several ethnic minorities becoming dependant on opium trafficking to make a living. When the production was rendered illegal these communities faced significant hardship. The magnitude of this adversity was amplified when the Thai government began to implement large scale elimination tactics in an effort to eradicate opium production.

Following the largely successful removal of the manufacturing of the substance, many families in the affected villages were forced into poverty. In the late 1980s various crop substitution plans were implemented, predominantly in Thailand. However, the effectiveness of such initiatives in providing people with a sufficient life sustaining alternative has been questioned (Mogg, 2006). Currently, with the production of opium still restricted, an alternative substance is emerging, namely Methamphetamine. Increased governmental attempts to eradicate further drug trafficking are thought to have involved human rights violations, which have impacted upon families struggling for survival (Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2002). As a consequence, people in the highland regions of Thailand found themselves unable to provide necessities such as food, shelter, health care and education. Similar hardships have been experienced in Myanmar, where the military junta rulers have exploited the situation, forcing children into labour and combat (Humphries, 2007). Wessells (2006) states that according to U.N. records, Myanmar has one of the largest numbers of child soldiers of any nation in the world. Children are made to work in threatening, abusive and laborious conditions by the ruling army. Young people continue to be placed at the forefront of political conflict in many parts of the world (Honwana, 2002). As Pearn (2003: 166) notes:
“There remain more than 300,000 child soldiers active and enmeshed in civil and international warfare. The typical profile of a child soldier is of a boy between the ages of 8 and 18 years, bonded into a group of armed peers, almost always an orphan, drug or alcohol addicted, amoral, merciless, illiterate and dangerous.”

In addition to drug smuggling therefore, the boundaries of the Golden Triangle present other significant problems for these communities. These borders attract the trafficking and exploitation of humans, particularly children.

The U.N. defines human trafficking as the recruitment and transfer of persons through improper means for the object of exploitation (United Nations, 2000). This problem has notable prominence along border regions as the transferring of humans, especially children, provides significant financial benefits for the trafficker. This process magnifies the vulnerability of the victim, as they are forced to reside in an unfamiliar environment, with little opportunity to escape. Traffickers openly seek out impoverished families, offering small financial payments in exchange for human cargo. Many are forced into agreeing such deals in order to alleviate the poverty they suffer. The drug and sex trade industries and to a lesser extent the slave labour industry are extremely lucrative and well developed in Thailand (UNICEF, 2002). The demand for such commodities serves to heighten the extent of the problem. In addition, the three governments of the region fail to acknowledge the existence of certain ethnic minorities. Many of the affected children, despite being born in Thailand lack formal identification in Thailand, Burma or Laos. They are therefore denied the basic human legal rights and recognition bestowed on citizens of these countries. There have been several campaigns led by lobby groups and NGOs which address the issue of child exploitation. This paper examines the role and nature of such NGOs, and in particular ‘Childlife Mae Sai’. This small organisation attempts to meet the needs of the extra-national or stateless (i.e. those not granted national identification by a country) youth population of the Golden Triangle. The research focuses on a short-term football-based social development programme, which was run by the second author of this article in August 2007. The collaboration with Childlife Mae Sai was established through the first author of this paper, who was responsible for developing international partnerships and external funding. This research also involves an exploration of sport as a tool for social development, in the context of the work undertaken on this initiative. Interviews were conducted with the four British coaches (BC) who led the programme, as well as with the four multilingual Childlife staff (CS) who oversaw the project. The objectives, logistics, challenges, outcomes and limitations were the topics of discussion with these interviewees.
Childlife Mae Sai: Football and social development

The focus of NGOs is usually directed towards humanitarian or developmental needs or both (Grzybowski, 2000). Whaite (2000) argues that complex humanitarian emergencies, famine and civil strife serve to propel humanitarian-based NGOs into the media spotlight. This partly reflects the human desire to respond to the adversity of others, and the complexities often associated with meeting such need. Developmental NGOs are usually concerned with the improvement of a particular society or societal sub-section. Tandom (2000: 319) claims that, “individuals and groups within the field of development derived, and continue to do so, their motivation from an ideological and spiritual commitment to social reform and change”. To address the range of problems which exist in the Golden Triangle region, several NGOs have been established, aiming to alleviate poverty and provide a better life for the young people subjected to exploitation. Their collective focus is to provide children’s shelters, increase public awareness of their plight, and to prevent human trafficking, sexual exploitation, and the spread of diseases such as HIV/AIDS. Childlife is a grassroots NGO which was established in 1999 by Guljohn Jeamram, and cares for up to 130 children at risk from exploitation and poverty. Its founder spent two years researching the lives of street children at the Mae Sai – Tachilek border bridge. Subsequently, he created the organisation and erected a shelter for children in this region who lack formal identification, providing them with refuge and education.

Childlife is one of a few NGOs to work with these extra-national or ‘stateless’ youths in the Mae Sai area. The children can be classified into five basic categories: street children, dumpster children, victims of child labour, children in difficult family situations and orphans. The Childlife shelter has a multifaceted strategy to combating these problems. This involves having a first point of contact for emergency and new cases, shelter to accommodate and feed the children, and a partnership with the local school to allow the children to receive Thai education. Also, a Nana Buffet and restaurant has been constructed to provide an avenue for vocational training, whilst partnerships have been established with projects in Burma to help combat the problem at its source. This strategy of providing accommodation, food and education aims to keep these children off the street where they are more vulnerable to trafficking and other street gang and crime activity. Childlife opted to implement a football programme to further the social development and education of the children. Football is applicable as it has been found to help mitigate social and political dilemmas. For example, Freeman quotes the former Iraqi national team manager Bernd Stange as saying: “The world has failed. I only wish that politics had rules as clear as those of football. It’s not a coincidence that FIFA has more members than the United Nations” (2005: 16). In addition, Nelson Mandela claims that football “is one of the most unifying activities amongst us” (Kuper, 1994: 138).
Football has also been discussed in terms of its “capacity for nurturing social order” (Giulianotti, 1999: 3). Also, Sorak (2002) claims that it is possible to use sports in order to establish moral boundaries, whilst Donnelly (1993) contends that football can have a transformational function in relation to social development. The use of sport as a developmental tool has also been recognised by the U.N. This can be seen in the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation’s (UNESCO) International Charter for Physical Education and Sport. This document advocates: “Placing the development of physical education and sport at the service of human progress, promoting their development, and urging governments, competent non-governmental organizations, educators, families and individuals themselves to be guided thereby, to disseminate it and to put it into practice” (UNESCO, 1978). A number of NGOs have utilised football in a developmental capacity, whilst some organisations have been established focusing solely on the sport. The ‘Open Fun Football Schools’ project in the Balkans is one example of the latter type, which is a reconciliation programme that promotes cross-ethnic integration (Gasser and Levinsen, 2004).

The Golden ‘TRIANGLE’ Football Project

Sport is considered to play an integral part of the physical, mental and social development of the children at Childlife. As one member of staff explained: “The annual sports day at the local village school is eagerly anticipated by the children. Training and a lot of preparation goes into the event” (CS). Many of the children at the shelter play sport after school, partly because electronic entertainment equipment such as televisions and computers are not available: “The kids play sports as there’s not much else for them to do. There’s no electricity for TV. Boredom can be part of the problem, as they can get into trouble then. So we try and occupy them” (CS). Another worker noted that, “the popular sports of Thai and Asian society are mirrored at Childlife. The children enjoy football, volleyball and takraw” (CS). The shelter volunteers encourage participation in some form of exercise every day, and organise a weekly sporting activity for the children. In addition: “We occasionally arrange football matches with another shelter in Mae Sai, some friendly, some competitive. There are teams of boys, girls, younger boys and staff and volunteers” (CS). Staff members also commented on the benefits of: “The generous organisations and individuals who conduct workshops and activity days at the shelter. It exposes the children to opportunities and experiences they would otherwise never have had with their disadvantaged background” (CS).

The Golden Triangle football project was a short-term initiative run by British football coaches. Translation and other logistical support were provided by the local staff. As one of the interviewees noted, transportation was the most significant initial chal-
lenge: “We got a long-haul flight to Bangkok, an internal flight to Chiang Rai, a taxi to the river, then a boat down the Mekong River. Then we walked over the borders. When we arrived we were exhausted but as soon as we saw the kids at the shelter we were motivated to coach. And the staff had organised everything so well” (BC). The project involved a series of coaching sessions, followed by competitive tournaments. Many of the staff noted the significance of football, and in particular this coaching programme: “The kids love it when foreigners come with new skills and games. All of them really enjoyed it, but also learned a lot. The guys from England left some balls, and the kids were putting their new skills into practice long after they’d left” (CS). As well as the perceived enjoyment, other staff members considered football to provide: “A level playing field, as the children are discriminated by society. It’s an area where they can excel and not be disadvantaged or judged due to their ethnicity or personal situation. It breaks down barriers” (CS). In addition: “It helps the kids express themselves, especially those that are good at sport but not so much at school. It gives them confidence and esteem” (CS).

Before commencing the project, the British coaches went on a tour of the Golden Triangle region, to try to gain a better understanding of the challenges that children from that area are facing. This helped inform the approach required for the football programme: “We went across the river into Laos, but most of the kids are from Burma and Thailand, so we spent most of our time at the bridge at that border. We had to give our passports in when crossing into Burma and were told if we don't return by the end of the day we wouldn't get them back. It was a crazy situation. You could feel the political tension” (BC). Another coach noted that: “We saw the kids begging at the bridge and some were sniffing glue. They all looked so young. It gave us an insight into the area and prepared us for what we were there to do. We knew we had to be enthusiastic and get them active, but also focus on behaviour” (BC). After some preliminary discussions with the local partners, the coaching team decided to implement a value-based coaching model. As Lambert (2007: 20) argues, the challenge for coaches working in environments such as this is to: “Identify specific concrete behaviours that are attached to values and to reinforce them so that they may be taken beyond the football field”. Beedy (1997) refers to these concrete behaviours as ‘teachable moments’. This formed an important feature of the project, and provided opportunities for coaches to highlight instances where values had been violated, or preferably demonstrated in a positive way. For example, if a ball is kicked off the pitch and a player from the opposing team goes to retrieve the ball and hand it to his opponent, this could be used to illustrate the principle of respect.

In preparation for the programme a series of coaching plans were developed. This incorporated the technical work provided by Beswick (2001), Hargreaves (1990) and Bidzinski (1997). As one of the coaches stated, given the small window of opportu-
nity to coach it was: “Vital to help them improve their skills, particularly passing, shooting, dribbling and defending. They can develop themselves now we’ve given them the basics” (BC). However, as one of the coaches noted: “There were two points to the programme. Make them better players and better people” (BC). The trainers offered insights into how the value-based approach was implemented to make positive changes in the lives of the participants. Instructors commented that the popularity, universality and competitive nature of the game, together with the importance of teamwork, responsibility, respect, and other values associated with football render the sport a useful tool in this regard. For example: “Football is a world game so it’s easy to learn. They can take this forward too. Plus the competition side helps them learn about life and how to behave” (BC). Sessions were based around technical instruction, fun-based implementation of such lessons, and finally, a stable but competitive environment in which to test their abilities against their peers. Opportunities to talk about the values associated with the sessions were incorporated within each element. The key values and objectives were trust, respect, inclusion, attitude, neutrality, graft, learning and enjoyment or ‘TRIANGLE’. As one of the coaches explained: “We corrected bad behaviour and reinforced good behaviour. When we saw an example we stopped the session and talked to the kids about it” (BC). Also: “The values focused on trusting each other, respecting the opposition and including all members of the team in everything. Then there was having the right attitude when playing football, not discriminating against anyone from another race, hard work, learning new skills and fun” (BC). The symbolic term ‘gold’ was implemented by giving each participant a gold coloured medal after the tournament.

Newman (2005: 19) argues that “young people often have extremely limited social networks exclusive of anyone beyond immediate family members”. However, in the Childlife shelter, the children are denied even these “limited” opportunities. This places greater importance on their socialization with fellow orphans at the centre. Given the range of backgrounds and ethnicities that Childlife cater for, together with close proximity in which they live, the children sometimes experience problems with neighbouring youths. The football project was perceived to provide a key opportunity to: “Expend energy in a positive way and learn life skills. It helps them bond and get to know each other. This is one big family and it’s vital the kids get along if they are to stay here. Don’t forget, other kids with their background are at the borders smuggling and sniffing glue” (CS). Other local staff members were also mindful of the benefits of the programme: “Football is a great way to teach the kids morals and behaviours associated with teamwork and following rules. It gets them used to relying on each other and it makes them more cooperative with other children” (CS). In addition, the Golden Triangle project openly embraced the competitive nature of football. Coaches said that they used this context to teach players about ‘losing well’ and ‘winning well’, and to emphasise that participation is more important than
Respondents also commented on the significance of selecting teams during tournaments that reflected mixed identities. This helped avoid the notion of victory representing a triumph over another minority. Townsend (2007: 135) argues that the essence of coaching philosophies in developing countries should involve: “the children themselves solving disputes and overcoming hurdles as they arise”. The competitive element of the project enabled the children to think of potential solutions to many of the problems they faced. It also helped players develop the skills they had learned, build relationships and improve their character, for: ‘The focus wasn’t football. The focus was the kids’ (BC).

Finally, there were some limitations of the project. Although balls and cones were donated, the coaching programme was not continued after the initiative had concluded. There were initial plans to include a coach education programme for local coaches to help sustain the work. However, no suitable and willing candidates were available during the limited time available to the British coaches. In addition, the children did not have proper footwear to play in: “Football boots are rare and only donated by volunteers, but this presents a problem of equality as it’s difficult when you’ve got 130 children” (CS). However, as one of the coaches argued: “Boots would be good, but they aren’t vital. Other things are more important like food, medicines, text books. But as long as they have a ball and this big playing area at the shelter then they can play. That’s the beauty of football” (BC). As Doyle (2007: 65) states, another potential challenge in projects such as this is when participants are: “resistant to the aspirations of the project… and impatient when values rather than football is being discussed”. However, the children readily understood and accepted the rationale behind the coaching programme, as one of the volunteers explained: “The kids just loved playing. They understand that life is difficult and they have a good attitude to learning. We try to reinforce that attitude and this coaching programme has helped make that clearer for the kids” (CS).

**Conclusion**

Projects of this nature often involve working in challenging environments, and the Golden Triangle is currently particularly problematic. Three weeks after the completion of the programme, anti-government protests caused widespread violence in Myanmar. Then in May 2008, an estimated 22,000 people died with a further 1,000,000 displaced when a cyclone hit the country. The government were heavily criticised by the international community for not allowing responsive aid to enter the country. These situations have helped draw the attention of the world’s media to the extensive problems that the region faces. In spite of such difficulties however, the Golden Triangle football initiative was considered to have been: “A great success as the kids learned so much” (CS). During interviews, the research respondents
Angela Yong and Joel Rookwood described football as cheap, simple and easy to organise and manage, with minimal problematic cultural variations apparent. Comments were also made about the sport encouraging human contact, engagement and bonding, which according to Tidwell (1998) are important in order to avoid hatred and violence. Coaches also discussed how the regulatory component in competition was an effective method of disciplining players. It was argued that adjusting to rules in sporting contexts can positively impact the likelihood of players behaving appropriately in social settings. This can help prevent conflict, which contradicts the work of Kriesberg (2003), who argues that conflict is unavoidable. Also, in discussing programmes of this nature, Nujidat (2007: 154) states that the participants are not likely to: “Grow up to be professional football players, but surely they will be better human citizens because of it”. Through its value-based approach and focus on teachable moments, the Golden Triangle initiative was perceived to have succeeded in: “developing skills and giving lessons for life” (BC). Therefore, further research on this initiative might incorporate a long-term evaluation of its benefits to the community in terms of the successful (or not) transfer of socially acceptable practices from football to daily life. This scheme could also be considered relative to other projects, such as the social inclusion initiative Football for Peace, based in Israel, and Liberia’s STAR football project, which helps integrate child ex-combatants back into society (Liebmann and Rookwood, 2007; Rookwood, 2008). Such work could help us ascertain a more holistic view of how football can be used for social development to bring about a positive and lasting impact in the lives of the participants.

References


**JQRSS: Acknowledgement Footnote**

1. I found the process of writing this article brought clarity to the very rewarding and worthwhile work I have had the privilege to be involved in. I am grateful to Joel for helping run the programme and for helping me structure and re-draft this article.

2. Angela is 25 years old and recently graduated with a degree of Arts in Sport and Exercise Management. She is a passionate follower of a number of sports. She worked in the borders of the Golden Triangle for one year in 2006 and 2007, and currently lives in Sydney, working for a humanitarian organisation.

3. Dear reader, if this article has stimulated your thoughts and you wish to find out more about this topic the authors can be contacted on: Angela Yong: angelayong@optusnet.com.au and Joel Rookwood: rookwoj@hope.ac.uk. Also, the website for Childlife can be accessed at www.childlife-maesai.org. This features images, videos and stories of children supported by the organisation, as well as details of past and forthcoming projects.