

## Sport and Social Capital

The concept of 'social capital' is now beginning to play a much bigger role in public policy and as John Williams suggests (see Section 3) sport is a key 'arena for promoting social relations and community bonding'. However, as John Williams also points out sport can be responsible for some of the more extreme forms of 'bonding' social capital, which creates strong support for one team by inhibiting the 'bridging' to other teams and groups. But 'social capital' is not yet widely understood, nor accepted as being within the competence of local authorities and their partners. The pioneering work of the London Borough of Camden and the IPPR to assess and measure social capital at a local level may however mean that this position changes. (Sticking Together – social capital and local government, LB Camden and IPPR, 2006).

If social capital – the loose associations and networks which enable people to work together and establish neighbourliness and trust – becomes a key part of public policy, then sporting links and associations will inevitably be seen as more important. From a cohesion perspective, the concept of 'bridging' social capital is pretty much equivalent to 'cross-cultural contact' and is a means by which we can begin to break down the barriers and develop understanding and trust between different communities. As discussed above, the emerging best practice (see also section 4) now adopts cross-cultural sports activities.

However, associational engagement, which can also be formed by sporting organizations – clubs, societies, league structures and governing bodies - is a key part of civil society. The hundreds of sports bodies, which are generally constituted on a voluntary basis, can also draw people together, across boundaries, and facilitate cross-cultural understanding. Social capital is in no way limited to the relationships that develop on the sports field. Varshney's *Ethnic Conflict and Civic Life* (YUP, 2002) draws upon previous work in Northern Ireland to highlight the beneficial effect of a range of Lions Clubs, Rotary Clubs and integrated sports societies, which have become a bulwark against civic unrest, simply because of the association and trust which had been previously created.

In the present context, following a small incident, or a rumour which has begun to fly around communities, unrest can quickly follow, unless community leaders are able to quickly confer, challenge the information and respond by quelling the anxieties. This demands pre-existing networks. Sport alone cannot provide them, but should be part of that community tapestry which can do so.

Such networks may need to be established and sports associations can provide a ready made vehicle. At a national level, organizations like the Inter-Faith Network have been responsible for promoting cross-cultural and inter-faith dialogue and many local networks have been established over the years. These have been purposely cross-cultural and local and regional sports associations should consider how they measure up. They also need to

understand that cross-cultural contact, unfortunately, does not generally arise naturally and often has to be 'engineered' in the first instance to break down barriers and to give people the confidence to move out of their comfort zones.