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Developing the Games: Diplomacy Through Sport ^[1]



The Tokyo Olympics were scheduled to start this summer. But due to the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic, no one can predict whether the Tokyo Olympics will even go forward next summer. Despite this uncertainty, sport is a flexible and effective tool to promote peace and development in the world.

Since UNESCO adopted the "[International Charter of Physical Education and Sport](#)"  in 1978, the world has come to recognize the value of sports. According to [Associate Professor Chiaki Okada at Osaka University](#) , the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of 2000 have triggered a more active discussion about the involvement of sports in development. In 2015, the UN adopted the [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), which stated:

Sport is also an important enabler of sustainable development. We recognize the growing contribution of sport to the realization of development and peace in its promotion of tolerance and respect and the contributions it makes to the empowerment of women and


of young people, individuals and communities as well as to health, education and social inclusion objectives.

Furthermore, to strengthen the sport policy linked to the 2030 Agenda, UNESCO's Sixth International Conference of Ministers and Senior Officials Responsible for Physical Education and Sport adopted the Kazan Action Plan in 2017. This plan fosters the sport policy framework with five actions for international and national multi-stakeholder cooperation.


Before the world society gradually recognized the significance of international development through sport, the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) had already been focusing on this initiative for the past 50 years. In 2013, the Japanese government announced their initiative "Sport for Tomorrow (SFT)."  In addition, JICA recently outlined "Sport for All"  that identified three cardinal pillars: (1) Physical Education Support, (2) Social Inclusiveness and Peace Promotion, and (3) Sports Competitiveness Improvement.

At this Host City Election in 2013, the Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe actually mentioned JICA's long-lasting dedication in his presentation:

"So, the very next year (of Olympic Games in Tokyo in 1964), Japan made a volunteer organization and began spreading the message of sports far and wide. Young Japanese, as many as three thousand, have worked as sports instructors in over 80 countries to date. And they have touched the hearts of well over a million people through their work."

Since 1965, JICA has dispatched 54,417 volunteers to 93 countries to support international development (as of February 29, 2020). Among them, 4,527 have volunteered in the sport field in about 190 different individual sports. Surprisingly, the volunteers were involved in the training of 92 Olympians, including seven medalists (three gold and four silver medalists)  since the 1988 Seoul Summer Olympics .

One of the most fascinating examples for the Tokyo Olympics is the case of the "Malkia Strikers," the Kenyan Women's Volleyball Team. Mr. Shota Katagiri, a JICA volunteer, joined the Malkia Strikers to provide physical training expertise and tactical data analysis. He connected the practical training learned with on-court performance. In collaboration with both the Kenyan head coach and other coaches, Katagiri's refined tactics based on his persistent analysis of rival teams resulted in the team's qualification for the Tokyo 2020 Olympics (Olympics in 2021 will still be called Tokyo "2020" Games). About forty years of solid relationship in the volleyball sector between Kenya and Japan undoubtedly added to the team's success.

In the context of gender equality, there are places where it is challenging culturally and/or religiously for women and girls to participate in sports around the world. This makes the empowerment of the Kenyan women's team even more encouraging. Dr. Daichi Suzuki , the Commissioner of Japan Sports Agency, admitted that gender equality in Japan needs improvement. He portrayed the sports community as a model for the rest of Japanese society, as the number of female national representative athletes in Japan has tended to outnumber that of male athletes since the Athens 2004 Games. Sport can lead to inclusion in all aspects of life.

Another unique way JICA is indirectly involved with Japan's Olympic preparations is through the "Host Town" initiative  for various Olympics participating countries, where Japanese

cities and towns welcome participants and people from countries across the globe. Since JICA volunteer alumni are all over Japan (and the world), they are especially helpful human resources for local Japanese towns 🇯🇵 that gain exposure due to the initiative 🇯🇵.

An example of the Host Town initiative at work is the partnership between the country of Palau and Hitachi Omiya city, in Ibaraki prefecture 🇯🇵. Their relationship started over 70 years ago when Japanese families of fallen WWII soldiers started visiting Palau to console the spirits of their lost ones. Based on this history, Ms. Mitsuki Honda, the JICA volunteer alumna who was the coach for Palauan national track and field team, is now working for the various interactive Host City programs between Palau and Hitachi Omiya city. They are not only accommodating the Palauan national team's pre-training camp there but also offering an exchange program among schoolchildren, conducting Palauan seminars, and opening social media channels to communicate with each. Their goal is to continue the multifaceted cultural exchanges even after Tokyo 2020.

The spirit of the Olympic Games advocates world peace and the betterment of the world, which naturally includes development. Looking back at modern Olympics history, they have not been postponed since the first Athens Games in 1896. They were canceled in 1916, 1940 and 1944 due to WWI and WWII. In May, Mr. John Coates, an International Olympic Committee (IOC) member, said "it could be a very different Games to what we're used to" depending on the situation of COVID-19 by October this year. This month, IOC president Thomas Bach said behind closed doors that the Olympics "is clearly something we don't want." Now, the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Flame is in a secure location somewhere in Tokyo. Will we see the Torch Relay next year? Even if not, we will not stop igniting a passion for development through sports.
