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The Role of Sporting Events in Developing Countries.

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Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to be here today and give this presentation about the Role of Sport in Developing Countries.

While the World is seeing a growing number of extraordinary athletes – men and women born in the South, coming from poor developing nations – setting new international records and distinguishing themselves in the many arenas of sport, it is a fact that the events are almost exclusively taking place in the rich part of the world.

Around 30 industrialized countries are hosts to 95 % of all international and world sports events each year.

Of the 17 football world cups during the last 75 years, it is only 6 that have been held in developing countries. This took place in Latin America.

South Africa will be the first African country to host a world cup in 2010.

The first modern Olympic Games were held in Athens in 1896 - during the 109 years since then, only the Games in Mexico City in 1968, and Seoul in 1988 have been held in what was then developing countries.

But even if priority has not been given to holding, world sports events in developing countries, sport is there, it exists – it is alive in spite of lack of money and resources.

To-day, it many times seems as if sport is linked to money only, we forget that sport is linked to the human spirit it is indeed linked to human progress development and our future.

The United Nations is right when it declares:

“...Sport is far more than a luxury or a form of entertainment. ...Access to and participation is a human right....The potential of sport as a tool for development and peace has yet to be realized...”

(Sport for Development and Peace: Towards Achieving the Millennium Development Goals. UN 2003.)

In many institutions and organizations working with international development there unfortunately still exist a view that sport is a secondary priority and indeed a luxury. They cannot be more wrong.

The excitement of a race along a dusty, potholed country road, the fun of a soccer game in a back street or a rough field, even if the ball is nothing more than rags tied together with string, the happiness of playing and competing, even in places where happiness rarely is seen.

We know that participating in sport can offer happiness and hope, even when nothing else does.

We know that entire communities can benefit from a variety of sports initiatives. Sport is an energizer, both physically and mentally. We therefore must recognize the opportunity for empowerment that sports movements like GSA and other organizations can provide.

We can provide an arena for participation and most importantly self-expression and self-esteem.

The full potential that sport can have in empowering and fulfilling the rights of women and children, the marginalized and disabled have not been exploited. There is a need for action plans and simple strategies. This is a challenge for governments, development agencies and the sports organizations.

We have heard today that this year, 2005, is a very special International Year. And this Summit is contributing to making this year become a truly global year of sport. And I am not thinking of only our teams and athletes and how we perform ourselves.

I am thinking on how we cooperate and assist our brothers and sisters in the developing countries. The dimension of sports can help to generate good results if it is integrated with education and health, the environment and to promote peace and cooperation.

Our efforts must be based on creating partnerships with local and national authorities in the developing countries. Without local leaders and ownership it is hard to achieve lasting results.

Our aim should be to create a broadest possible participation. Many such partnerships have led to competence building in developing countries.

Let me as examples mention just a few of UNEP's partners who are using sport to create environmental awareness and development:

The Mathare Youth Sports Association in one of the largest slums in Nairobi combines sport with clean up events and environmental education. It is the largest self-help youth sports and community service organization in Africa. It has won the UNEP Global 500 Award and was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Sadili Oval, a health and fitness center in Nairobi Kenya, has won the Spirit of the Land award at the Salt Lake City Olympics in USA in 2002 and the 2003 G-ForSE Award. Sadili has joined forces with us to take sport and environment activities to the young generation and is running a Nature and Sports Training camp.

In Nepal, The Trekking Agents Association of Nepal and The Nepal Mountain Bike Association have used World Environment Day, celebrated every June 5th to organize a race and create awareness about conservation and protection of the national environment.

2005 is only 10 years away from the deadline set in the UN Millennium Development Goals – the 8 goals set by world leaders to fight world poverty, to give children access to education, to promote gender equality, to reverse the HIV/AIDS pandemic, to ensure environmental sustainability and to create a true partnership for development.

We have been given plenty of opportunities to make a real global impact. That is, if we have the necessary will to put nice words into action. In making a change we need the help of sports associations and organizations, the individual sportswomen and sportsmen to mobilize the public and to push politicians to make good promises a reality.

So we are talking about mobilization of people. Sports provide a unique opportunity for contact and dialogue. And few can communicate better with the public than famous athletes and sports stars. We reach the active athletes, spectators, sponsors and the media. A great arena for promoting the messages of sustainable development and caring for those who need our help.

For instance, in my country, Norway, the sports community was a great partner in raising funds for the victims of the Tsunami.

Sport can be a wonderful tool in development. It appeals to all ages, women and men, all cultures and religions. It will benefit our health and well-being, it can offer

a positive change from our daily struggle of life. Sport can teach us valuable lessons which will benefit individuals and communities. Sport stands for interdependence and teamwork.

There are also negative sides we should be aware of when we seek new partnerships and ways to achieve development.

There are dangers of misuse of funds, even misuse of people and young talents. There is a call for transparency, and ethical guidelines. Many young people in developing countries see sport as an opportunity to become a rich celebrity in a foreign country and to escape a life in despair and poverty.

Only a few will be able to achieve this, and many will fall victims to sly operators and greedy agents.

The world is getting smaller and the knowledge about life in the rich nations of the world is reaching the most remote corners. Information often twisted and colored but causing frustration, false hopes and even hatred.

Our world is changing – and not only for the better. I cannot help thinking about the last weeks' terrorist attacks, caused by frustrated, fanatical and twisted minds.

Instead of working together to give people of the poor areas of our world better lives full of hope and with more possibilities, there is a danger of creating more hatred, discrimination, intolerance and less understanding.
We must fight this with all available means.

To grow up in a developing country with few or no possibilities to learn and develop - can easily kill your dreams.

Young eagerness and impatience which are positive forces, can easily turn into despair or be led into negative and destructive actions.

Sport cannot solve all problems, but it is an important tool for change.

In this race we must now speed up the pace. If we work hard at it, we will all be winners!

Thank you!