



UNIVERSALITY AND DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

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Sports play an integral role in the development of a stable, peaceful and orderly society. It is imperative, therefore, that sports leaders exert their utmost efforts to further widen the appeal of sport and ensure that sports become more universal.

In this context, as a former Olympian who participated in three editions of the Olympic Winter Games, I would like to speak today on “winter sports and universality”.

The first Olympic Winter Games were held in Chamonix, France, in 1924. Only 258 athletes from 16 countries took part and competed in six sports. However, 82 years later in Torino, at the Olympic Winter Games in 2006, as many as 2,500 competitors from 80 countries competed in seven sports.

As the Olympic Winter Games are limited to sports, which take place predominantly on snow and ice, the extensive promotion of winter sports is relatively difficult – particularly compared to the sports that feature in the Summer Games. Nevertheless, over the past 80 years, the number of countries participating in the Winter Games has increased dramatically. And perhaps the most noteworthy phenomenon is that many of these were once considered non-winter sports countries.

This increase in popularity and participation can be attributed to several factors. Firstly, the promotion of additional sports such as freestyle skiing, short track speed skating, snowboarding and so forth has contributed immensely to the popularity of winter sports – particularly among young people.

Secondly, thanks to the remarkable development of state-of-the-art technologies, the construction of indoor snow and ice venues has now become possible. These indoor sports venues have enabled people to practise year round and have no doubt had a tremendous impact on the widespread promotion and development of winter sports.

Thirdly, the introduction of snowboarding has created a totally new breed of skier. Snowboarding is easier to grasp than conventional skiing and has captured the imagination of young people around the world.

Fourthly, the rapid development of communications systems has also been a major contributing factor behind the increasing universality of winter sports. A large proportion of the world's population now has access to electronic media, and this has played a significant role in further disseminating the excitement and exhilaration of winter sports. As a result of this exposure to winter sports, there are a growing number of people eager to try out the sports for themselves. And those who are really hooked even move to countries where they can spend their time practising and enhancing their skills.

A prime example of this is the case of the athlete from Guam who competed at the Sarajevo Olympic Winter Games. As everyone knows, Guam is a small island located in the middle of the Pacific Ocean where there is no snow. However, this athlete was so attracted by the sliding sport that he decided to move to the United States and dedicate the next few years of his life to achieving his dream of competing in the Olympic Winter Games.

Last, but certainly not least, the Athlete Assistance Programme for the Winter Olympic Games, launched by the Olympic Solidarity Commission of the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in 2001, has been playing a significant role in enhancing the capabilities of athletes and the universality of winter sports. In Torino, athletes from as many as 26 countries took Olympic medals home.

In closing, I would like to emphasise that winter sports can play just as important a role as summer sports in passing on a legacy of peace to future generations. Therefore, the International Winter Sports Federations and the people concerned must make it their mission to further expand the universality of winter sports to as many countries as possible.