STORY


Photo Kristina Molloy


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Looking for the spark

How will Whistler reach out from its lofty position of advantage to those who are disadvantaged?

By Glenda Bartosh


Photo Patricia Heintzman

Of the six billion people on Earth, one in six lives on less than $1 a day, often in a slum without basics like clean water, a toilet or a lockable door.

In 128 countries, hundreds of refugee camps are home to thousands of people fleeing violence and strife.

Global warming, war and lawlessness, and the simple hope for a better life mean that every week for the next 30 years one new city of 1 million people will be built. That equals 728 new million-people cities by the time Whistler fulfills its 2020 Vision.

Burgeoning populations, poverty and conflict can make the idea of global sustainability seem like a Disneyland fantasy.

Then there's Whistler: an undeniably beautiful and privileged — some say Disneyesque — place where sport rules and pets live on more than $1 a day. A place that's adopted "sustainability" as its middle name. A place on the international radar screen, especially as it steps up to co-host an Olympic/Paralympic Games that's embracing sustainability — including the social aspect — like never before.

Add in the fact that two unlikely venues — local government and sport — can be among the most effective agents for bridging the gap between the ultra-haves and the have-nothings, and it all begs a simple question: how will Whistler raise its head out of its special valley-bubble and work toward a more balanced world?

POST-GAME CELEBRATIONS After a soccer game organized by Right To Play's Kristina Molloy (centre), the adrenaline still runs high. Soccer games give young boys something to look forward to, and that helps them resist the rebels who try to recruit them as child soldiers.

In sickness and in health; in richness and in poverty

'Partnership' gains new meaning at the municipal level

With mayors from places as diverse as Whistler, Bogotá and Kisumu — a city of 150,000 in Kenya that doesn't have a single fire truck — sharing stories at the UN-Habitat World Urban Forum in Vancouver last summer, people were bound to get inspired. How could those lucky enough to live in a place like B.C. bridge the have/have-not gap and make a real difference?

For instance, Delta Mayor Lois Jackson, who also heads up the GVRD, came away wanting to find a city or town somewhere in a developing region that her city could provide some practical support to.

Her idea is not to enter the traditional "sister city" relationship, which, although beneficial on some levels, usually amounts to educational and/or cultural exchanges between cities with similar characteristics. All too often the prosperous pair up with the prosperous.

Whistler, for example, has been a sister city with Karuizawa, Japan, since 1999. Like Whistler, Karuizawa is a popular resort town located in a beautiful, natural setting in the highlands about an hour north of Tokyo. Like Whistler, it's also built on tourism, hosting 7 to 8 million visitors a year.

Rather, Jackson is looking for a partnership whereby her city could move beyond student/cultural exchanges and share its expertise and resources to benefit a partner city in a developing region.

Fortunately, Canada has been a world leader since 1987 in making such connections. The international program run by the Federation of Canadian Municipalities (FCM) uses funding from CIDA (Canadian International Development Agency) to help local governments around the world deliver basic services like clean drinking water or sewage treatment, promote economic growth and encourage civic participation.

> **"Very often the normalcy of sports is the most important thing a child needs — some normality in an abnormal situation..."**
>
> — CAROL BELLAMY, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, UNICEF

"What we are talking about is practical stuff to improve the way municipalities work to enhance the quality of life for their citizens," says Brock Carleton, FCM's international program director.

Through the program, more than 200 Canadian municipalities have shared the knowledge and expertise of their professional staff, such as engineers, planners and financial managers, to help places in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

While Vancouver has provided staff with expertise in the Four Pillars Drug Strategy to help set up similar health programs in Bangkok slums, you don't have to be a big city to make a difference.

Take the case of Drayton Valley, Alberta, population 6,210. The town worked through FCM's international program to assist Lushoto, Tanzania with civic and economic matters. Then Drayton Valley went on to embrace Lushoto in a bigger way.

After visiting the town, Mayor Diana McQueen took it upon herself to head up fundraising for the Lushoto orphanage. Municipal staff members added to the effort by donating through payroll deductions, and local churches, organizations, and residents also jumped on board. The Drayton Valley Community Foundation even organized a grandparents' fund for Lushoto elders who are raising grandchildren after their parents died from AIDS.

What started as a municipal partnership has ended up as a relationship that transcends any cultural or student exchange.

Still searching for the spark

All of this is not lost on Whistler Mayor Ken Melamed. He was in touch with FCM when Whistler was looking at the idea of helping a town in Indonesia after the 2004 tsunami.

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"I was quite impressed with the questions he was asking and with his responses to my responses," says Carleton. "I thought, this is not a usual mayor, this is an interesting guy."

But unlike its neighbour, Squamish, which "adopted" Wanduruppa in Sri Lanka and raised over $1 million for schools and homes there after the tsunami, Whistler — neither its civic leaders nor its citizens — has never similarly partnered with a place in need, post-disaster or otherwise.

The intent is there: The 2020 Vision document clearly spells out that Whistler will establish a partnership with an emerging resort community in a developing country to share knowledge and Whistler's resources. It also spells out that the 2010 Games will be "… remembered as a key contributor toward advancing sustainability within the Olympic movement" and "…develop a shared commitment to sustainability…"

Plus, as Carleton points out, Melamed understands the need, in the context of both the Natural Step, which informs Whistler's framework for sustainability, and his own individual value system.

"We can't have a million children dying of starvation every year," Whistler's mayor has said in a previous interview. "We can't have that in a just society. We can't tolerate that kind of inequity.

"So we need to be able to create societies where people can have an assured quality of life — at least the minimum quality where they are not dying of starvation, disease and thirst."

To that end, he hopes Whistler will "adopt" not one city, town or village, but two. The question is how — and when.

"Unfortunately due to other constraints, it's not an easy fit for us at this time, and frankly I haven't wrapped my head around how to move it forward," he says.

Working through the FCM's international program isn't viable right now because of the time demands it would place on municipal staff — who are busier than ever in the run-up to the 2010 Winter Games — and the fact there's no extra money to cover the salary of a fill-in engineer, planner or whoever would be involved.

However, that doesn't preclude the community — an organization, a school, a bunch of individuals — from taking the initiative and building a relationship with a place, much as Drayton Valley has done with Lushoto and Squamish has done with Wanduruppa.

There's no doubt, says Melamed, that council is supportive of moving in this direction — it's just waiting for the right opportunity that grabs Whistler's imagination.

"The simple answer is we are looking for an idea that will generate that spark."

Resources:

For information on the Federation of Canadian Municipalities' international program, including the Africa Local Governance Program, log onto www.icmd-cidm.ca ■

Scoring points in Kenya

The Mathare Youth Sport Association (MYSA), established in Mathare, Kenya — one of the largest slums in the world — over 20 years ago by Canadian Bob Munroe also uses soccer as a tool for development and peace. Teams earn league points not just by winning games. Community service points are given for collecting litter and cleaning up neighbourhoods, and more points are earned if players stay drug-free for a certain amount of time and use fair play out on the field. The team jerseys and shoes are a big draw for kids who have next to nothing, but so are the confidence, leadership skills, and opportunities they gain.

Breaking out of the arena

The hidden powers of sport

A soccer tournament in Rwanda will be part of Kristina Molloy for the rest of her life.

"Thousands of people came out. At the end it went to a shoot-out and the fans were just freaking out. It was louder than anything I'd ever heard," says Molloy.

"They did a huge parade at the end and they hoisted all the players up on their shoulders and were running around the soccer field. It was unbelievable."

It was all so amazing, not because of the setting in the almost ethereal rolling red-earth hills of Rwanda, or the fans' wild enthusiasm, or the fact it took place in a refugee camp for 16,000 people.

It was amazing because the players were all girls. And only a few short months before, those same girls — members of traditional cultures that didn't allow them to take part in such activities — had been so jeered and laughed at as they made their first tentative attempts at playing soccer that Molloy had been moved to tears.

Molloy, currently a coordinator for the 2010 Paralympic Games, is no stranger to the emotional roller-coaster of sports. As a former rowing coach at UBC she'd seen the thrills, the disappointments. But in her year of volunteer work with Right To Play in Rwanda, she witnessed a new dimension to the power of sport and play.

Lillehammer's legacy

Right To Play sprang out of Olympic Aid, which started at the 1994 Winter Olympics in Lillehammer, Norway. The organizing committee there decided that the Games' legacy should reach beyond gold medals and world records, so that athletes could "give back" through a humanitarian organization.

Olympic Aid was born, a non-profit organization aimed at using sport and play to help children affected by war, poverty, and illness. The organization's vision is simple but powerful: "a world in which every child enjoys the right to play."

Quadruple gold medalist Johann Olav Koss, a native of Lillehammer and now the CEO of Right To Play International, was the inaugural lead athlete. He donated a large portion of his winnings to Olympic Aid, and challenged fellow athletes and the public to donate money for each gold medal won.

A record US$18 million was raised and used for five main projects, including building a hospital in Sarajevo, schools in Eritrea and a disabled children support program in Lebanon.

In 2003, Olympic Aid morphed into Right To Play, making the jump from being primarily a fundraising agency to one that focused more on implementing programs and embracing a variety of athletes, not just Olympians. But the organization remained the only non-profit allowed to operate on an Olympic site.

Today, Right To Play, which has its international head office in Toronto, runs more than 40 programs in 20 countries, all of them using sport and play to help children and youth in the most disadvantaged areas of the world.

The Right To Play program that Molloy participated in demonstrates how effective sport and play can be in community development.

Molloy and fellow volunteer Safari Gasisa, a Rwandan, were among the first to sign up in 2003. Their mission: to create a sport-delivery model at the Kiziba refugee camp, home to 16,000 people fleeing the Democratic Republic of the Congo because of the bloodiest war since Hitler's armies marched across Europe: 4 million dead, millions more uprooted.

After their training, Molloy and Gasisa flew to Rwanda and jumped right in, getting the kids involved with soccer, basketball and volleyball; working with schools to improve physical education (teachers were just marching the kids around for exercise); and teaching adults how to deliver the


Photo Kristina Molloy

STRETCHING BOUNDARIES A main goals of Right To Play's Kristina Molloy (centre) was to give women and girls at Kiziba refugee camp a rare opportunity — the chance to take part in sports and their own activities, like this yoga/stretch session.

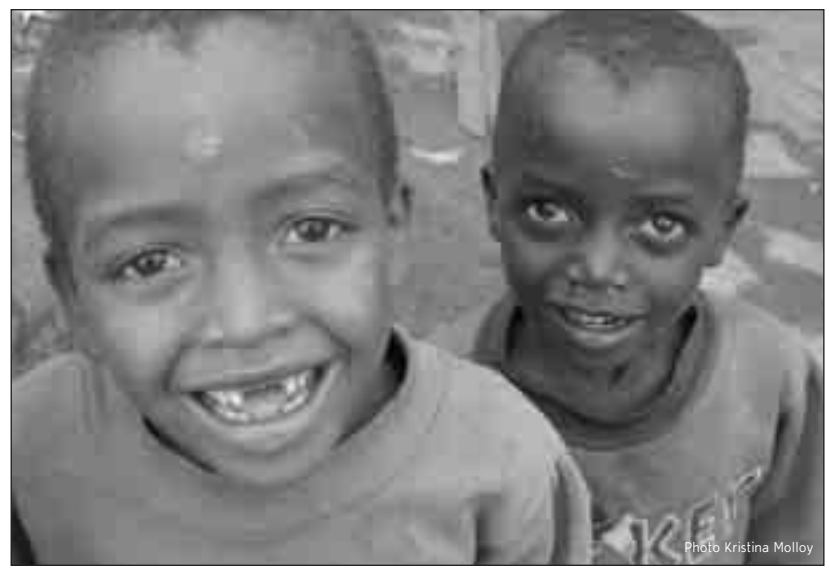
Photo Kristina Molloy

MILE-WIDE SMILES Thousands of children like Charles (left) and Mugisha (right) live at Kiziba refugee camp, home to 16,000 people fleeing war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

programs themselves to carry on. But the implications ran deeper than that.

"All these adults are stuck in the camp. They can't have jobs and they can't leave the camp so they have nothing to do. We created these training sessions to include as much soft skills training as possible — time management, organizational skills — to more sport-specific things like the rules of play," says Molloy.

"We also taught them — especially the women — the importance of sport and play for child development, to really encourage them to get their kids involved in these sport activities and games."

The upside for kids isn't just play time, something cherished by youngsters who've been uprooted by strife and taught to work for their families as soon as they can walk. Play can literally save their lives.

Congolese rebels roam the refugee camps at night to recruit child soldiers. UN observers have reported that boys are less likely to be recruited when they have something as simple as a soccer tournament to look forward to.

Sport as mobilizing tool

The way Right To Play parlays sport and play into tools for peace, health and development can be ingenious, the impacts astonishing.

More than 12 million children around the world have been vaccinated against a variety of diseases through Right To Play/Olympic Aid programs. Truces have even been set up in war zones like Afghanistan and Iraq during the Olympics to allow NGOs to do vaccinations.

One of the most successful programs is measles vaccination, largely because of the way Right To Play uses sport as a mobilizing tool to drive it. Soccer stars in countries like Ghana and Mali attract thousands of families to soccer games, where it's much easier than going out to small villages to do vaccinations.

Right To Play has also developed games to teach youngsters how vaccinations help protect them from disease, as well as how condoms can protect them from HIV/AIDS and how hard it is to tell who might carry HIV. Even the simplest games are followed up with discussions emphasizing health, hygiene and well-being.

For Molloy, experiencing it first-hand was beyond expectations: "I got to go on this incredible adventure, live in this completely different community, and put my background to use on something I really believe was making a positive impact on a community."

Could it happen in Whistler?

Could an initiative like Right To Play spring out of the 2010 Olympics? More than a few indicators point that way.

First, through Olympic Aid/Right To Play, the IOC has already demonstrated that sport can play a role in improving the lives of individuals and whole communities. It's also set up tools like Olympic Solidarity, which grants scholarships to assist athletes who might not be able to afford the cost of training programs.

As well, there's a lot of momentum leading up to the 2010 Winter Games in Vancouver and the 2012 Summer Games in London to increase social sustainability.

"The Olympics already have sport and culture as the first two pillars, and the environment as the third is now thickening to include social sustainability and economic sustainability along with environmental sustainability," says VANOC vice-president of sustainability, Linda Coady.

"Really, those aren't separate stovepipes. It's hard to have a healthy economy if you have a wrecked ecosystem and really unhealthy communities. So the linkage between those three is what Vancouver and London are particularly interested in."

Essentially, Vancouver and London are aspiring to be the breakthrough Games in economic and social sustainability that Sydney and Lillehammer were in environmental sustainability.

With all the Canadian connections to Right To Play — its international headquarters are in Toronto, and it has links to so many Canadian athletes like Steve Podborski, Charmaine Crooks and Silken Laumann — you can be sure you'll see a heightened Right To Play profile around 2010.

Can Mayor Ken Melamed see Whistler taking on an initiative like Right To Play?

"It's a tremendous inspiration to us to try and do something similar, and if not, then find a way to augment that concept," he says.

"I think it would be a tremendous legacy of the Games… It's completely consistent with this concept of the Olympic Games bringing opportunity where it might not otherwise occur."

Resources:

Connect with Right To Play at www.righttoplay.com. ■