

## RWANDA'S REBUILDING JOURNEY THROUGH SPORTS

### Rwanda's Minister of Sports looks at how sport has played an important role in rebuilding the country.

It's been 28 years since the Genocide against the Tutsi was put to an end. A lengthy and challenging reconstruction process followed and has been efficiently implemented with the participation of Rwandans across all walks of life. Sport has proven to be one of the key instruments in the rebuilding of the destroyed social layer in Rwanda. Sport has played an important role in rebuilding the social cohesion, reconciliation and citizen mobilization towards peace building.

During the years that followed the 1994 genocide against the Tutsi, communities across the country have been able to reunite and live back together due to sports events that were organised such as football games. It has to be understood that sport has the power to unite and bring together a community behind a team, a club in a given game. We have testimonies of survivors who, during the genocide, were spared by their killers just because they knew them as fellow fans in a given sport (football, volleyball...) or as players they related to in their preferred teams. The reconciliation process also considered the power of sport in rebuilding this social cohesion and to date it has had positive results.

In Rwanda, we have learned to be optimistic, motivated and determined. In Rwanda, sport has become a good channel through which different ideas, programs for peace and good governance have been channeled. Social programs have been developed throughout the country and have been playing a social cohesion and peace building role. Among these programs some renowned ones to mention are the Umurenge (Sector) Kagame Cup, Amashuri (Schools) Kagame Cup, Genocide Memorial Tournament, and in addition, 'Car Free Days' in all Districts are helping the Government of Rwanda to mobilize people around social development programs.

At an international level, having sports competitions like the CECAFA Kagame Cup has helped people from East African countries to feel like brothers and sisters. The opportunity for Rwanda to host different regional and international events is a chance to testify to the unity produced by sports men and women.

In 2018, Sports and Culture were approved as two of the country's development sectors. This confirmed the importance given by Rwanda's leadership to the power of sport in the country's social and

economic development. The 2020-2030 approved National Sports Development Policy has been geared towards achieving both social and economic objectives. This dynamic brings together the use of sport for social cohesion and peace building across the communities but also the call for sport to undergo a change of mindset into a business oriented sector towards its professionalisation.

The Government of Rwanda is attracting foreign private sector stakeholders to invest in sport infrastructures and to set up a conducive environment to attract international sporting events and foreign investment in the sports sector in Rwanda.

#### Sport has played a role in health promotion

We no longer consider sport as a mere hobby or leisure activity. Sport is considered as one of the means to fight non-communicable disease. As we have encouraged the practice of mass sports countrywide, Rwandans have taken the lead in making it part of their way of life. As a matter of fact, in all Districts of the country starting with the City of Kigali, mass sports are practiced as a prevention method against non-communicable diseases and as a means to achieving healthy living. Rwandan Districts take advantage of car free days and organise mass testing of non-communicable diseases to participants during car free days.

Referring to the results and data from the Ministry of Health, these initiatives are having a positive impact. This compels us in charge of the sector to come up with more social related activities that not just bring citizens and communities together but build a sporting culture among Rwandans as a way to live healthily.

We have seen the increased popularity and endorsement of social sports activities such as car free day programs across the country from District level down to sector level. We are introducing a monthly Kigali Night Run; so many initiatives from citizens are now increasing, we have been seeing an increase in amateur cycling and hiking especially led by youths and attended by elderly citizens.

Local and international NGOs have increased their interventions in the sports sector and as development partners, their programs provide added value and support to national programs and increase



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citizen participation while at the same time promoting healthy lifestyles.

#### Sport as the tool of international relations

Sport is growing and placing itself as one of the key ingredients of our country's diplomacy. Sport diplomacy is a promising soft power tool to strengthen Rwanda's position in the international arena to accelerate its development. We strongly believe that sport is a resource capable of enhancing Rwanda's attractiveness on the international scene while contributing to the socio-economic development of the country.

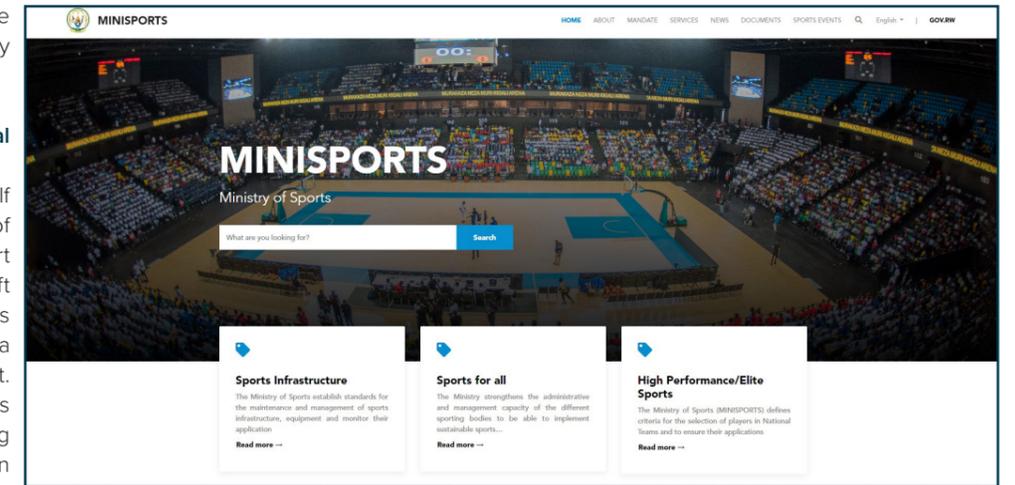
Under this approach, we aim to leverage existing and future frameworks of cooperation in the sports sector to foster international cooperation projects, responding to challenges that hinder the effective development of sport in Rwanda. Hence, we are committed to exploiting the economic potential of the sports industry including through diplomatic activity, advocating for the organisation and hosting of international sporting events in Rwanda. This has shown a considerable potential especially when referring to the events that have been hosted as of recently at the Kigali Arena during the COVID-19 world lockdown. The trust that has been given to Rwanda by International Sport Federations for the safe and professional hosting and organisation of their games, for instance the BAL (1st edition), the FIBA AFROBASKET 2021 Senior Men' National Teams Competition, the CAVB Nations Men and Women Championships, the Rubavu Beach Volleyball Star 2 Championships among others.

The hosting of events on the international stage brings recognition, gains and support to the country. Rwanda is hosting the Commonwealth Heads of State and Government Meetings (CHOGM) in June 2022 which will be followed at the end of July by the 2022 Commonwealth Games in Birmingham. For Rwanda as the new Commonwealth Chair-in-Office, we will certainly look at how we can play our role in promoting the use of sport as a vehicle for development and peacebuilding across the Commonwealth.

One of the priority areas of our national transformational development strategy is to establish Rwanda as a globally competitive knowledge-based economy; and among the key strategic interventions is to leverage on sport as an integral component of social, economic and human development and a necessary underpinning to health and well-being. It has to be understood that when integrated into the broader framework of development goals, priorities, programs and activities, sport can address basic needs and advance sustainable human and social development.

#### Sports for economic growth

The development of sport is becoming not only a focus on practice or exercising but it is also linked to various sectors of social development, diplomacy and economic growth from the business



generated across the sporting events to the products created in sports. It has been proven that the development of any sport is done through partnerships and investment, made possible by sports organisations and the private sector through business or related companies.

The sports industry has become a multi-billion-dollar industry which fosters innovation and trade, and boosts foreign exchange earnings. Staging sporting events, whether at grassroots, national or international levels, can enrich the social and cultural fabric of communities, making them more attractive locations for investors and tourists.

The Commonwealth should also not be left behind in pitching in this very lucrative approach for sports investment. Investments can bring along job creation for our youth and create opportunities for start-ups to bloom and grow. Staging sporting events can enrich the social and cultural fabric of communities, making them more attractive locations for investors and tourists. Rwanda, and all the Commonwealth nations, should see and seize the opportunities in the sector and plan to establish the conducive environment for foreign and local investments in sport.

#### Conclusion

In today's global society, sport is a major contributor to the economic and social development of all peoples. And of course, sport also contributes immensely to the social and emotional excitement of a society, which is mostly what makes a population's wellbeing and happiness. Sport has long been considered as a valuable tool for fostering communication and building links between communities and generations.

Rwanda recognises sport as one of the pillars of social transformation and development. It is our mandate as Rwanda, as the Commonwealth to ensure that sport is promoted in all corners of society, unbiased by gender, age or physical capacity; and to create the conducive environment to allow business-led investments in the sector that will unveil the existing and long ignored potential of our youth.