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FILLING THE GAPS

Identifying the successes, missed opportunities, and prospects for diplomacy exchange during the GAPS 2016-18 Programme

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Executive summary

Described as the ***purposeful*** use of sport to build or wield ***diplomatic capital*** to advance ***national*** or ***global interests,*** sports diplomacy is of increasing relevance in today's contested world. State and non-state actors across the globe are investing in their sports diplomacy practice and developing strategies around it. Yet practice continues to develop in varying directions, and there is no single formula for taking sports diplomacy forward.

GAPS Programme 2016-18 offers a distinct case study in multistakeholder-multisport-multilateral sports diplomacy—with potential for global impact.

With the support of the Commonwealth Sport Foundation, this study seeks to explore the potential of *GAPS Programme 2016-18*. It examines how sports diplomacy was experienced and observed through the Programme, noting multiple dimensions of impact spanning the i) individual / community; ii) institutional; and iii) national / international levels.

Findings reveal that *GAPS Programme 2016-18* delivered significant, yet serendipitous diplomatic wins at each level. They confirm the highly unique nature and potential of *GAPS Programme 2016-18* as a sports diplomacy endeavour that might transcend the pitfalls of 'national interest'.

However, the findings also reveal missed opportunities, stemming primarily from gaps in the way that sports diplomacy objectives and principles were considered and applied in Programme design and delivery.

The study also shines a light on persistent gaps in knowledge about sports diplomacy practice beyond the nation state. It seeks to highlight the role that less conventional actors including the Commonwealth Games Federation (CGF), sporting organisations and universities might play in advancing sports diplomacy objectives.

Together these observations pointed to five key themes or 'critical levers' that appear to underpin the sports diplomacy potential of *GAPS Programme 2016-18*, including: i) a commitment to inclusion; ii) an emphasis on athlete performance; iii) recognition of coaching capacity; iv) a university-engaged approach; and v) an emphasis on effective partnerships. These are set out in more detail within this Report.

Additionally, the study proposes several recommendations to be taken forward to develop the sports diplomacy potential of the GAPS Programme as it takes a global turn. These include:

Key recommendations

At the **strategic level** the CGF, Griffith University and other GAPS Programme partners should take on a leadership role in defining sports diplomacy for the multistakeholder global landscape. Set out briefly here, these recommendations are discussed in greater depth later in this document (p. 21):

1. Initiating the development of an agreed sports diplomacy strategy

2. Establishing a *GAPS Global* Sports Diplomacy Advisory Council

3. Supporting an in-depth research project to collect, document and share *GAPS Global Programme* participant stories, which will contribute to understanding of sports diplomacy in action.
4. Investing in the development of a *GAPS Global*-Sports Diplomacy Community of Practice.

At an **operational level**, the CGF, Griffith University and other partners might consider and embed practical sports diplomacy activities in Programme design in a way that is appropriate for local contexts. This might include:

5. Embedding cultural leadership and engagement within training camp programs.

6. Designing athlete and coach-driven next-step programs to build community initiatives and sustain training programs that advance innovative sport participation opportunities.
7. Establishing a *GAPS Global* Alumni Network that connects alumni (athletes and coaches) to each other across sports and regions.

8. Promoting in-country specific programs (and local competitions) with leadership provided by *GAPS Programme* champions and alumni.

9. Maximising researcher expertise to measure and document social and other impacts and outputs to identify diplomatic outcomes that will support ongoing investment from and engagement with traditional diplomatic actors and networks.

Introduction

Diplomacy is an evolving practice. In recent decades diplomatic practice has shifted from an elite form of interaction between official representatives of the sovereign state, to a one that embraces a range of state and non-state actors, including institutions, media, and ordinary citizens. It utilises innovative modes of engagement and increasingly occurs in unconventional settings. In today's world, much diplomatic activity takes place in the public sphere where global actors seek to enhance their influence, build relationships, and manage their reputations, all in pursuit of their interests on the global stage.

Sport, alongside culture and education, has long been associated with diplomacy's broader agenda in large part because of its universal appeal based on transcendent qualities of human expression and endeavour. It draws on the profile, skill and influence of sporting leaders and occurs in arenas and competitions conducted on the global stage. Major sporting events, like the Olympics and Paralympics are lauded for their global diplomatic appeal and spectacle bringing athletes and audiences from across the globe together in the pursuit of athletic excellence and peaceful competition.

Sporting events and competitions offer a unique environment around which diplomatic interactions and interventions can take place, often serendipitously, between countries, communities or groups and individuals. In contemporary practice though, sports diplomacy also connotes political and policy dimensions. It describes the purposeful or intentional use of sports, sports people, or sporting arenas by global actors for the purpose of influencing global policy outcomes (Murray 2018).

This study, supported by funding from the Commonwealth Sport Foundation, focuses on the sports diplomacy potential of a unique multistakeholder-multisport multilateral initiative delivered by the Commonwealth Games Foundation (CGF) with Griffith University as *GAPS Programme 2016-18*.

Much of the anecdotal evidence to have emerged since its launch suggests that sports diplomacy is an inherent by-product of *GAPS Programme 2016-18*. This study explores this proposition is more detail. Primarily, the aim is to generate insights for global multistakeholder sports diplomacy practice enabling a more purposeful approach that can deliver impact and contribute to legacy outcomes—particularly when associated with the Commonwealth Games.

Spotlight on GAPS Programme 2016-2018

As a distinctive model of multistakeholder-multisport-multilateral sports engagement, the *GAPS Programme 2016-18* remains underexplored as an example of sports diplomacy. Launched in 2016, *GAPS Programme 2016-18* brought a diverse cohort of 70 athletes and para-athletes alongside 25 coaches and administrators from 12 Pacific Island nations together in a series of intensive training camps as preparation for the 2018 Commonwealth Games. Participants gained access to world-class facilities, expert coaching, personal leadership development and cultural engagement—with each other and with Australian counterparts.

Through this project, the research team focused in on the extent to which sports diplomacy occurred through design, delivery, and impact of *GAPS Programme 2016-18*. In addition to desktop research, in-depth interviews were conducted with key participants— facilitators, researchers, and administrators of *GAPS Programme 2016-18*. As representatives of the Commonwealth Games Associations of Vanuatu and of Fiji, the Pacific Games, the Oceania National Olympic Committee, the Commonwealth Games Federation and the Menzies Health Institute, Queensland, the participants in this study brought a range of perspectives to the fore.

Taking a narrative inquiry approach to the interviews, each participant was asked to reflect on their engagement in and perception of the GAPS Programme 2016-18:

- How they understood the goals of the Programme, and whether those goals were achieved?
- The extent to which the Programme impacted in a sustained way on individual, community, national and regional outcomes, including enhanced linkages—beyond sporting performance?
- Whether the program offered opportunities for political and economic engagements and the degree to which these opportunities were leveraged?
- Where were opportunities for sports diplomacy missed?

Unfortunately, the ongoing impact of COVID-19 and associated travel restrictions prevented the participation of Pacific Island athletes and coaches in interviews—originally planned to be conducted on site in the Pacific rather than online— as part of the narrative inquiry process. This is an area for future attention.

Sports diplomacy context

Emerging literature on sports diplomacy highlight the concept as an innovation in diplomatic practice that reflects the global realities of today's connected yet contested world. It highlights the "renewed focus on culture; on the power of ideas and values; and on the complex relationship between hierarchical organizations and informal networks" (Evans & Steven 2008) in international relations. Sport, by virtue of its universal popularity, connection to human experience and organising capability, offers a unique vehicle for advancing powerful ideas and values on the global stage.

Though a relatively new term, yet evident in practice through history, sport diplomacy formalises patterns and trends that have become familiar in diplomacy's evolving practice over millennia (Murray 2018).

It builds on the well accepted functions—representation, communication, and negotiation—of traditional diplomacy (Rofe 2021) aligning to its core objectives (see Bull 2002) to:

i) Enhance influence and outreach
ii) Improve opportunities for communication—promoting dialogue and cooperation while minimising friction —between global actors
iii) Promote opportunities for economic benefit
iv) Provide a platform for advocacy on key foreign and global policy issues
v) Shape public perceptions in ways that promote policy outcomes.

Yet, as an innovation of practice, sports diplomacy extends beyond the traditional bounds. As a public endeavour, it embraces the role of unconventional actors, from sporting organisations to ordinary citizens. But it still requires a structured and deliberate approach (Murray and Pigman 2014).

The fact that governments around the world, such as the United States, the United Kingdom and France, are investing in the development of their own sports diplomacy strategies and practices is evidence of its increasing relevance in today's competitive global landscape (Byrne 2017). Global sporting actors including the Olympic Movement, the CGF and other sporting bodies are increasingly aware of an integrating the principles of sports diplomacy in their outreach and engagement, especially around major events.

To this end, sports diplomacy, is linked to the generation of 'soft power' (Nye 2008). Described as an 'enabling' force within international relations, soft power leverages the appeal of a culture, values, institutions, and foreign policy to gain influence through attraction rather than coercion. When viewed through this soft power lens, sport is increasingly recognised as a mechanism that offers potential for generating the various forms of 'diplomatic capital': breaking down cultural barriers, generating goodwill and building reputation (Jarvie 2021). Importantly, sport is also seen as a vehicle for advancing positive, non-sport outcomes for individuals and communities including in areas of human rights, gender empowerment, social inclusion, and cohesion as well as health and wellbeing. These outcomes, championed through the 'sports for development' (SFD)

approach, already utilised by many institutions, fall under the sports diplomacy umbrella when also aligned with diplomatic goals and national interests (Rofe 2021).

While the positive elements of sports diplomacy are widely promoted, scholars and practitioners alike remind us of the 'dark side' of sports diplomacy (Murray 2018). There are myriad examples of sport utilised for political gain, advantage, and manipulation in international relations, while global sporting bodies are frequently associated with cheating and corruption. Fundamentally, like all approaches to diplomacy, there are risks that arise when employing sport in certain diplomatic settings (Redeker 2008). Drawing on and learning from examples of sports diplomacy in action while casting a critical eye across the interests and long-term outcomes—particularly where there are political and power differentials at play—will assist sports diplomacy actors avoid the potential pitfalls that can arise in this emerging area of innovative diplomatic practice.

Sports Diplomacy 2030: a model of sports diplomacy strategy

Australia leads the way in explicitly linking sport to advancing the nation's interests and aspirations on the global stage. The Australian Government's most recent sport diplomacy strategy, *Sport Diplomacy 2030,* launched in 2019, identifies sport as an increasingly important part of diplomatic practice, noting it as a partnership opportunity between government and industry and placing special emphasis on the vital connection between Australia and its neighbours in the Indo-Pacific. Building on the success of an earlier iteration (*Sports Diplomacy 2015-2018*) and administered by the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), *Sports Diplomacy 2030* brings whole-of-government emphasis to the use of sport as a vehicle for enhancing Australia's outreach and influence, building visibility and reputation, and contributing to positive outcomes including through contributions to advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The broad aim of *Sports Diplomacy 2030* to "bring people together, generate goodwill and cultivate partnerships for Australia across the world" is not simply altruistic. Set against the backdrop of a more competitive and contested global landscape, the Australian Government's emphasis on sports diplomacy reflects the emerging diplomatic imperative to work harder to sustain influence and secure interests in the Indo-Pacific region while also addressing the serious challenges of poverty, inequity, and disadvantage through a sport for development approach.

Anchored by four key pillars of activity, Australia's sports diplomacy agenda actively seeks to:

- Empower Australian sport to represent the nation globally
- Build linkages with regional neighbours
- Maximise trade, tourism, and investment opportunities
- Strengthen communities in the Indo-Pacific and beyond.

Though crafted against specific contextual demands of Australian foreign policy interests, the underlying approach and aims of these pillars reflect a framework for sports diplomacy activity. Australia's sports diplomacy strategy offers a model framework, which builds on a partnership with sport to achieve wide-reaching political, cultural, economic and development goals for the nation and the region.

The values underpinning Australia's approach sports diplomacy—including emphases on excellence and integrity; partnership between government, industry, and community; regional linkages; and strengthening community outcomes—are implicit in the strategic priorities. The lack of explicit policy emphasis on the underlying value proposition and its significance for the multiple stakeholders engaged through the strategy is a potential gap. How these values are demonstrated practice is yet to be fully tested.

Sports diplomacy: lessons learned

As the range of global actors engaging in public diplomacy activities—from multilateral organisations and global NGO's to substate actors including universities—proliferates, there is value in reflecting on these points of caution. Research suggests that global actors seeking to utilise sports diplomacy should:

- Be clear about the strategic intent and expectations of sports diplomacy.
- Explicitly articulate and demonstrate the underpinning values that frame and guide good practice—from sporting excellence, integrity and fair play to diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- Engage in purposeful design and evaluation to ensure objectives and outcomes for all stakeholders are aligned.
- Ensure resourcing for sustained implementation while maximising opportunities for individuals / communities, institutions, and the international relations of global actors.

Case Study: GAPS Programme 2016-18

Launched in 2016, *GAPS Programme 2016-18* was a Pacific-focused international training camp approach developed to support athletes and coaches across the Oceania region in the lead-up to the Gold Coast 2018 Commonwealth Games. Led by Griffith University (Menzies Health Institute Queensland) in partnership with Commonwealth Games Federation and City of Gold Coast, it brought athletes and coaches from Oceania Commonwealth nations and territories to take part in intensive training camps on the Queensland's Gold Coast (home of the 2018 Commonwealth Games).

International training camps are a widely accepted practice among many high-performance sport nations. Typically, they enable athletes, coaches, and other support staff to "travel abroad to destinations that exhibit the same or similar features of a competition environment for purposes of acclimatization and familiarization" (O'Brien, Riot and Minehan 2020). International training camps are seen to provide an opportunity for learning, upskilling, and accessing expert training as well as high-performance facilities and equipment. Yet, access is often restricted to participants representing industrialised nations, and the focus tends to be highly specialised (ie. oriented towards a single sport and country), with a format that is often highly instrumental, sometimes to the detriment of the participating individual athletes (Maguire 2011).

GAPS Programme 2016-18 was designed to offer an experience that could be differentiated from the usual approach. As described by Riot, O'Brien and Minehan (2020):

> *...[it] was open to all Oceania Commonwealth Games Associations (CGA), with at least one athlete from each of the 12 Oceania CGA's guaranteed a place. The program hosted 50 elite athletes competing in boxing, swimming, beach volleyball, lawn bowls, and athletics and 25 coaches, team management and venue managers from Vanuatu, Fiji, Tuvalu, Tonga, Solomon Islands, Cook Islands, Norfolk Island, Niue, Nauru, Kiribati, Samoa, and Papua New Guinea.*

Conducted over an 18-month period and incorporating three intensive (five day) training camps on the Gold Coast, it offered access to facilities and expertise not readily available to the participants in their home countries. Furthermore, it enabled athletes representing a range of nationalities, sports, and abilities, including para-athletes (some of whom had never competed at an international level) to come together.

Beyond the initial goal of developing athletes' skills to improve their performance at elite competition, the Programme also sought to understand the "participants' own expectations and experiences rather than their performance outcomes". *GAPS Programme 2016-18* centred on the human and social experiences as well as the performative element of sports. The development of cross-cultural sensitivity, leadership and representational skills, awareness of the socio-cultural context, and the general political status of the participants were incorporated into the design of the Programme. Programme facilitators employed reflexive and nuanced approaches to account for and engage with the diversity of linguistic and cultural participation. Based on research, the process hoped to move toward Dogra's (2003) "interactional nature of sensibility", that draws attention to "acquiring methods for acknowledging differences and

working with it in a constructive and positive way" to "generate shared understanding and dialog." To this end, the Programme offered an opportunity for participants to engage and share experiences that enabled personal development while also fostering friendships, networks, new skills, travel, and cooperation—all through the means of sport.

Initial Programme evaluations focused on athlete development and sporting performance confirmed the positive impact of *GAPS Programme 2016-18*. Focus groups research demonstrated the significance of Programme design and delivery in facilitating the necessary social, economic and performance capital of the participants—the absence of which can feed into feelings of marginalisation, exclusion and ultimately performance anxiety for athletes and coaches (Riot, O'Brien and Minehan 2020). High profile success was most visibly evidenced by the medals won by participants in their Commonwealth Games events. That success was not only felt at the individual level by the athlete and coaches, but resonated at the community and national levels, elevating the prestige of Pacific Island nations—some of which had never before won medal recognition at the Games—on the global sporting stage. The diplomatic impact of these achievements at the time was significant in terms of amplifying platform, voice and reputation for these individuals and their representative countries (Riot, O'Brien and Minahan 2020).

The Programme also succeeded in cultivating less visible platforms for positive social change with an emphasis on diversity and inclusion. This was most obviously achieved by intentionally designing a program that brought together all participants into the main program. Women and para-athletes, in particular, and their unique sporting experiences were at the forefront of training sessions. In this way *GAPS Programme 2016-18* demonstrated the potential for targeted interventions to overcome cultural and social barriers for sporting success while promoting inclusion in the context of the major Commonwealth Games event. The Programme provided a foundation for participants to continue to advance the inclusion agenda over the long term through sporting competitions and in their home country. The point was well made by *GAPS Programme 2016-18* participant and Commonwealth Games bronze medallist Friana Kwevira who, upon winning the medal noted her aspiration "to empower women – especially those with a disability – back home" (Armbruster 2018).

While these outcomes have been reviewed and evaluated through the lens of sports management, sociology and science disciplines, limited attention has been paid to whether and how they feed into a larger sports diplomacy framework. Taking this idea forward demands further consideration of the objectives and outcomes produced by *GAPS Programme 2016-18*.

Applying a narrative inquiry approach

Narrative inquiry or "the study of the ways humans experience the world" (Connelly and Clandinin 1990) offers appeal for this study. As social beings, we find meaning and make sense of our own

lives and the world we live in through the stories people use, tell, and even live. The fact that narrative inquiry has at its core a focus on the study of experience, as it is lived, (McMullen and Braithwaite 2013) holds relevance to a wide range of disciplines from anthropology to cultural studies to education, psychology, and communication (Daigle 2016).

This study draws on the use of narrative inquiry which has been shown in other fields such as education studies, to emphasise the place of reflective practice as a means of shaping programme design and approach (Connelly and Clandinen 1990). There are obvious synergies given the experiences of many interview participants in this study—as facilitators and administrators within *GAPS Programme 2016-18*—informed Programme approaches.

Narrative inquiry is less familiar to the study of diplomacy. Yet, in a world where issues of representation, cultural and linguistic misunderstanding, reciprocity, influence, and power relations loom large, narrative or storytelling "facilitates an understanding of the way that the international acts at the level of individual lives and bodies—and vice versa" (Daigle 2016).

Observations and impacts

For this reason, we engaged participants through interview to speak to their experiences and observations of *GAPS Programme 2016-18*. Through their narratives, this study sought to identify, understand, and interpret the common themes relevant to each level, and to map these themes against sports diplomacy objectives to reveal the opportunities—those delivered *and* missed—of *GAPS Programme 2016-18*.

Importantly the narratives revealed the significance of sports diplomacy issues and impacts at multiple levels of analysis: i) the individual/ local; ii) the institutional; and iii) national / international.

Individual / local observations and impacts

At the individual level the experiences of the athletes, coaches and administrators is central roles to the success of the *GAPS Programme 2016-18*. For many of those interviewed it was clear that the primary focus for these individuals was on the opportunity for them to improve their sporting performance and improve on personal bests.

Yet some participants revealed other fundamental considerations at play for these individuals, including that of ***access*** to:

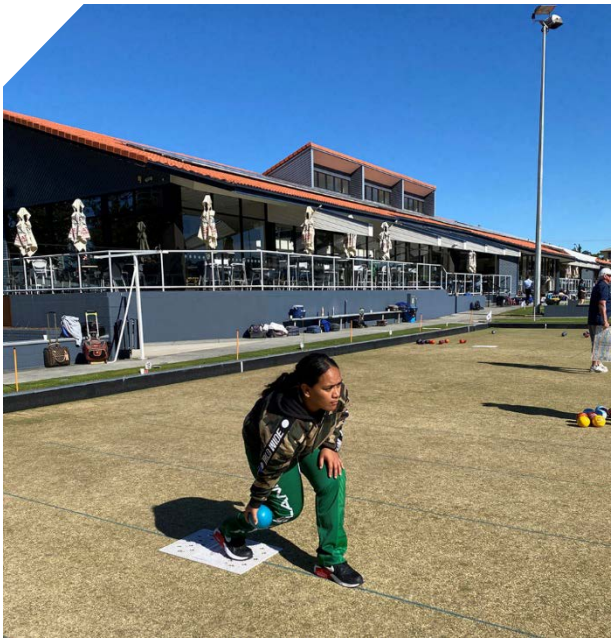
- Opportunity (noting that for some GAPS athletes they had never considered competing in sport).
- Quality infrastructure and facilities not otherwise available in their own country or town of origin.
- Professional staff and experts from nutritionists to specialists in biomechanics – which, for many athletes, "would have been the first time exposed to this kind of level of … assistance and preparation … as well as the facilities".
- Education and skills for participants not widely available in their country or town of origin.
- Space and time dedicated to their performance otherwise unavailable to these individuals.

Additionally, interviewees pointed to the developing increased social awareness and capital beyond immediate performance outcomes, which was developed and sustained over time.

This empowered representation manifested in a variety of forms including through:

- Increased confidence and motivation in the lead up to competition.
- Shifting perceptions of elite sports to consider the next level of athlete performance.
- Empowered athletes with confidence and self-belief to see a career beyond the Games.

As one interviewee noted about the participating athletes, "These kids came back, and they were enlightened. They came back seeing what it was like to be a high performing sportsperson. It changed their perception of themselves and others…"



Another interviewee told the story of an athlete who participated in the *GAPS 2016-18 Programme* before competing in and winning bronze in boxing at the 2018 Commonwealth Games. Upon returning to their home country, the same athlete turned entrepreneur, opening a fitness centre and gym. In recounting the narrative, the interviewee noted that the athlete's coaches, trainers, and sports body administrators all made the point that without the training and focus provided through *GAPS Programme 2016-18* the chances of long-term success for that individual would have been marginal at best.

Interviewees suggested that these sustained social outcomes were amplified for para-athletes—particularly those from the Pacific typically not included in international training camps, and rarely given the opportunity to train in a multi-sport environment alongside other athletes. The interviewees spoke of their immense pride in being part of the Programme's uniquely inclusive engagement approach that purposefully:

- Identified para-athletes and created pathways for their participation—with the broader aspiration of supporting their participation in international competition.
- Delivered increased diversity—to deliver improved understanding, acceptance, and respect for difference within a multi-sport setting.
- Engaged para-athletes as professional/elite athletes, with a focus on supporting their potential for achievement.

The deliberate support of coach education through *GAPS Programme 2016-18* further highlighted the significance of individuals in delivering sustained impact. Interviewees spoke to their observations of increased motivation and confidence amongst participating coaches resulting in higher levels of aspiration in competition performance alongside greater awareness of the potential to effect grassroots community change through sports participation. Interviewees also noted that the participating coaches developed connections with each other, which over the

course of *GAPS Programme 2016-18* evolved into networks that fostered new and sustained forms of knowledge sharing and exchange.

Grassroots community engagement provided an important foundation for *GAPS Programme 2016-18*. This included through the involvement of Pacific islands sporting clubs and groups in talent identification and outreach across participating Pacific islands—highlighting the place of sport in society at large, and the potential for non-sport outcomes.

One interviewee made the point:

> *[There was] a willingness and a desire to understand the context at which we are developing these athletes. It's not just about what we can offer these athletes when they come to Queensland or Australia [to train], it's what we do to support them in their country over the long term.*

Interviewees spoke mostly to the longer-term community impacts of GAPS Programme 2016-18, which saw the community look up to sportspeople with respect for their achievements in national representation. Some noted subsequently higher levels of participation in sports, alongside higher intakes of nominations for future events—all stemming from the changes witnessed by the community in athletes who had participated *in GAPS Programme 2016-18*.

One interviewee made the point:

> *The general acceptance that high performance sport doesn't produce mass participation outcomes, has meant that many Australian sports programs—especially in the Pacific—shifted to focus on development goals. The GAPS Programme 2016-18, however, firmly centred on high performance also presents to the wider community a possible avenue for development. Sportspeople at the grassroots and community levels can see that through the GAPS Programme they have a possible path for high performance development.*

Again, the significance of coach education was also highlighted, with interviewees making the point that coaches "don't just coach at the elite level, but also at schools and grassroots clubs", bringing improved skills and confidence with them and generating sustained community impact.

Furthermore, the storied of *GAPS Programme 2016-18* athlete success on the competition stage, spread and amplified through traditional and social media networks—resonated far across the Pacific. These stories not only generated greater interest in community sports participation but also new forms of inclusion and support, especially for peoples with a disability, otherwise so often excluded from community life.

As one interviewed put it, the success of para-athlete Friana, "sends a message to … the country and to its people that you can achieve with a disability, you can achieve great things if you've got the support."

From another:

> *This GAPS camp approach really feeds into the whole necessity to integrate para-athletes fully into their sports and into their countries. Out of that we can change cultures and change acceptance of people with impairment.*

And from another:

> *I hosted a speaking engagement for businesspeople in Vanuatu to go back to the community and speak about those three women that won those medals. I think we raised over lunch 12,000 AUD which was the annual budget for the Paralympic Committee. It's only because the businesspeople hadn't heard of these athletes before. But when they turned up and they had won medals and had gotten personal best performances – it was a no brainer – the business community wanted to get involved.*

Institutional observations and impacts

The multistakeholder engagement model promoted through *GAPS Programme 2016-18* offers potential for institutional linkages—adding to the sustained value to the community impact of the Programme. Unlike other international training camps, *GAPS Programme 2016-18* leveraged the complementary strengths of university and research institutions, sporting bodies and international organisations. The collective value derived from the various institutional inputs and connections offers a unique sports diplomacy model for global policy and practice.

Interviewees noted the significance of university involvement in bringing **evidence-based research**, alongside **credibility** and **legitimacy** to the Programme. Others suggested that working with research experts and leaders meant that the was able to flexibly adapt and change according to the needs of the participants. There was also a sense that the potential for these linkages to evolve and grow—including through regional collaborations and innovative international education partnerships (for example with the University of the South Pacific) provided as yet untapped opportunities. Many pointed to the strong appetite across the Pacific to foster these institutional partnerships, as a contribution to broader human resource development in the Pacific over the long term.

GAPS Programme 2016-18 demonstrated that enabling athlete performance—from grassroots participation to international competition—can happen quickly in the Pacific. The nature and speed of this transformation highlights the fragilities and weaknesses in the existing systems and institutions underpinning athlete development and success. Within this environment, shoring up institutional capacity through wider linkages with sports organisations offers an important foundation for the ongoing development and stability of the Pacific sports sector.

The significance of the Commonwealth Games Federation and various national Commonwealth Games Associations was highlighted through *GAPS Programme 2016-18* as bringing **sustained organisational heft** to the Pacific sporting sector. This was reflected through more rigorous approaches to selection, ensuring for example that marginal athlete cohorts, including para-athletes and women would be considered, included, and supported. One interviewee highlighted the potential for reputational impact on sports

organisations, noting how the Oceania Paralympic Committee is now seen as an important "link… [for para-athletes] in providing guidance and direction."

Interviewees also pointed to *GAPS Programme 2016-18* as providing a unique pathway with sustained opportunities for athletes to access international competitions, including the 2026 Melbourne Commonwealth Games, the 2028 Los Angeles Olympic Games, and the 2032 Brisbane Olympic Games, all considered to be accessible and relevant for Pacific participation. Indeed, athlete participation from one Games event to the next, offers the potential for long-term performance improvement as "a lot of those athletes are still competing and are in the national squads vying for selection to the Commonwealth Games, and there's a chance for them to carry on to the next Olympic Games."

Beyond athlete performance, the linkages offered through the Commonwealth Games Federation and relevant associations offers important opportunities for lifting governance structures and standards while addressing and advancing integrity in Pacific sport. The consequence, according to one participant is the potential for "improved credibility, more investment in and enhanced participation in sports governance in the region." Governing bodies have responded to this success by seeking to maintain this momentum.

International observations and impacts

Despite its focus on athlete and coach performance outcomes, *GAPS Programme 2016-18* tapped into significant interests of nation states operating at the regional and international levels to advance influence, relationships, and reputation on the global stage.

The broader opportunities for relationship-building and cooperation between countries—through people-to-people interactions was not missed. The format of *GAPS Programme 2016-18* drew special attention to and reinforced the "binding family" nature of engagement between Pacific nations:

> *By doing everything together, from meals to training, there was a real cross-communication between all involved that really enhanced—the island family.*

The linkages across the region are stronger given the Programme's increased legitimacy in the region following success at the Games. This has built deeper trust between different actors, who are now open to future cooperation: "it was a one team approach."

> *No doubt about it, it's only by actually uniting our resources—physically and mentally—around [the] table that we'll be able to build better athletes in the regions.*

Interviewees noted that the response of government leaders from all levels, including Prime Ministers was important, and highlighted the diplomatic potential of Programme engagement. Diplomatic officials and missions were sometimes involved across the range of events surrounding implementation of *GAPS Programme 2016-18*. This was especially the case for Australian diplomatic staff working across embassies and high commissions in the Pacific who engaged from time to time with events in-country. In part their interest reflected the emerging significance of sports diplomacy—particularly in the Pacific—in advancing the nation's regional interests.

For Australia, the diplomatic opportunities are significant. The prestige attached to Australian sport—along with success in sport at the international level—creates a level of influence throughout the Pacific. Many Pacific nations consider Australia as a "country of preference" when it comes to accessing sports performance, competitions, facilities. And Australia, as a regional power, is well positioned to provide valuable support to Pacific neighbours. Relational influence cultivated through sport sets up a foundation for deepening cooperation in other policy domains of mutual interest, including education, business and trade, defence, and security.

Many interviewees pointed out that *GAPS Programme 2016-18* enabled two-way pathways and benefits for Australia and to Pacific neighbours. This is an important point of difference to many other diplomatic and / or development interventions that occur in the region. In contrast to the tendency to impose a pre-determined solutions onto Pacific nations, *GAPS Programme 2016-18* offered the opportunity for Pacific nations to identify their needs through sport. The highly engaged, two-way dialogic nature of Programme design ensured mutually beneficial outcomes.

However, the interviews consistently revealed that it was at this 'high-diplomacy' end of the Programme that the sports diplomacy potential was most often missed. Diplomatic, trade or development interactions were unplanned and ad hoc, while key events were rarely designed to engage political diplomatic, trade officials in the broader potential of sports engagements.

From an international perspective, there was limited engagement with Sports and Foreign Ministers either from the region, or more broadly from across the wider Commonwealth. For example, ministerial engagements and meetings are frequently convened around major sporting events. Often these interactions provide important basis for knowledge sharing and exchange on policy interventions that achieve local and global outcomes (including in line with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals - SDGs). At no stage of the interview discussions was it evident that the *GAPS Programme 2016-18* was considered either as a convening platform for high level senior official or ministerial dialogue or promoted through existing ministerial interactions and events.

Missed opportunities

The participants interviewed through this study generally agreed that *GAPS Programme 2016-18* generally achieved its intended goals, and unexpectedly delivered several sports diplomacy outcomes. However, it became clear through the narrative process that the sports diplomacy potential of the Programme was not recognised. This is understandable given the nascent understanding and awareness of sports diplomacy as a vehicle for achieving wider political, development, trade, and cultural impacts. As one interviewee observed:

> *I don't think we've [the Commonwealth Games Federation] explored it [sports diplomacy] sufficiently and we didn't take advantage of it, because probably we didn't understand it. We don't really know effectively how to leverage sports diplomacy.*

Another made the point: "just by adding that 1% to your programme, [it] could make 100% [difference] on the other side."

Through this study it became clear that:

- There was no clear strategic vision regarding the sports diplomacy potential of the Programme, coupled with gaps in awareness of and attention to sports diplomacy objectives in early design phase. Ultimately these gaps undermined the potential opportunities for sports diplomacy gain through and after *GAPS Programme 2016-18*. While many sports diplomacy objectives were achieved through the Programme, these were largely ad hoc and serendipitous.
- At an operational level there was a lack of proactive engagement with relevant diplomatic and other official networks (e.g., with host, participant, and other relevant nations, as well as multilateral organisations) to advance sustained impacts in policy and practice. Building and mobilising these connections early might have also brought operational efficiencies (including in relation to travel requirements), amplified the visibility of the program within political and policy communities, and enabled early identification of high-level promotion, dialogue, and engagement opportunities, including at the ministerial levels and within the Commonwealth structures.
- Sustained opportunities for delivering community development, cultural engagement and other non-sport outcomes missed in the design phase and not fully tracked, communicated, or leveraged through and after Programme delivery—ultimately minimising the systemic policy impacts that might be realised.

Critical levers

Evaluation of the available research and narrative surrounding *Gaps Programme 2016-18* reveals that strategic clarity to sports diplomacy objectives must be embedded into the programme from the design phase. At the same time, attention should also be given to the following critical levers or underlying principles that have emerged as distinguishing features of engagement that support the sports diplomacy potential of *GAPS Programme 2016-18*. These critical levers underpin unique opportunities for diplomatic leverage—setting *GAPS Programme 2016-18* apart as a multistakeholder—multisport—multilateral sports diplomacy endeavour. These critical levels provide the foundations for successfully developing the sports diplomacy potential of *GAPS Global* into the future.

Commitment to inclusion: The primary lever evident in *GAPS Programme 2016-18* is the inclusion of all athletes from all countries and sports within the Commonwealth Games purview, and potentially the Olympics movement in future as well. Promoting diverse and inclusive sport that supports more people to be active more often, creating stronger and healthier communities at home and abroad, whereas many people as possible see and feel the benefits of sport and physical activity through every stage of their lives—speaks to the shared interests of *GAPS Programme 2016-18* participants.

Emphasis on athlete performance: The key focus on athlete performance is a powerful lever that connects to the motivation of athletes and coaches, contributes to individual and community performance development, and brings longer-term sporting prestige at the national / regional levels. Interviewees noted a contrast to other programmes in the region that are purely focused on development outcomes. With further targeted design and development, *GAPS Programme 2016-18* has the potential to achieve wider non-sport outcomes that build on the inherently inclusive format while still achieving high performance and sporting excellence outcomes.

Recognition of coaching capacity: The coaching support provided by *GAPS Programme 2016-18* empowered individual coaches through the development of performance related skills and techniques while also building deeper capacity relevant to longer term community participation outcomes. Coaching networks were strengthened in the region as a platform for knowledge sharing including towards future events. Effective coaching support and connection contributes beyond immediate sporting activity towards sustained outcomes.

University-engaged approach: The unique programme leadership and facilitation provided by Griffith University brought a significant level of institutional, intellectual and research credibility to the design and delivery of *GAPS Programme 2016-18*. As knowledge-based institutions with that bring a commitment to quality education and research, breadth and depth of expertise, and access to world class facilities, universities hold significant value for multistakeholder sports diplomacy endeavours. They provide alternative pathways of communication and cooperation at arm's length from government and corporate interests with potential to build enduring research and education pathways and collaborations.

Emphasis on effective partnerships: The unique multistakeholder—multisport—multilateral nature of *GAPS Programme 2016-18* demands a commitment to building strong, open, and collaborative partnerships. *GAPS Programme 2016-18* demonstrated the necessity of partnerships spanning participants and communities, sports organisations, national and international institutions, and government. While many of the partnerships underpinning *GAPS Programme 2016-18* evolved initially from personal connections, a deeper understanding of complementary interests and the commitment to shared benefit of the different partners emerged through the program. Explicit attention to the shared value proposition underpinning the GAPS partnerships should be built into the design of future programs.

Next steps

The performance and knowledge gains experienced by athletes and coaches participating in the *GAPS Programme 2016-18* (Riot et al., 2020; O'Brien et al., 2021), show the potential of sport-for-development initiatives to foster diplomatic outcomes and productive capacities. By providing access to high performance sport facilities and strategic advice on training and performance, athletes and coaches engaged in new environments that prepared them for international competition, and experienced opportunities to strengthen local, national, and international connections, forge friendships and intercultural relations, and open dialogue to amplify the reputation of Australia as connected and trusted.

Key recommendations

At the **strategic level** the CGF, Griffith University and other GAPS Programme partners should take on a leadership role in defining sports diplomacy for the multistakeholder global landscape. This might include:

1. Initiating the development of an agreed sports diplomacy strategy that sets the strategic intent / vision of the *GAPS Global Programme* as a multi-stakeholder global initiative—setting out the underpinning values and value proposition; strategic priorities; and indicators of success.
2. Establishing a *GAPS Global* Sports Diplomacy Advisory Council—with representation from key stakeholders and regions—to provide further leadership of sports diplomacy potential of the Programme while identifying opportunities and communicating outcomes in the decade ahead.
3. Supporting an in-depth research project to collect, document and share *GAPS Global Programme* participant stories, bringing their challenges, strategies, aspirations, and longer-term outcomes (individual, institutional, global) of their participation to life and thus contributing to understanding of sports diplomacy in action.
4. Investing in the development of a *GAPS Global*-Sports Diplomacy Community of Practice to facilitate the sharing of knowledge, expertise, and experience—contributing to the theory and practice of sports diplomacy in a multi-stakeholder context.

At an **operational level**, the CGF, Griffith University and other partners might consider and embed practical sports diplomacy activities in Programme design in a way that is appropriate for local contexts. This might include:

5. Embedding cultural leadership and engagement within training camp programs to bring participants together with a view to represent, exchange and celebrate diverse social and cultural values, identities, and perspectives.
6. Designing athlete and coach-driven next-step programs to build community initiatives and sustain training programs that advance innovative sport participation opportunities (shared experience to improve health and performance behaviours) and target gender and disability justice in and through sport in key regions (e.g., Pacific).
7. Establishing a *GAPS Global* Alumni Network that connects alumni (athletes and coaches) to each other across sports and regions, coordinates opportunities for ongoing development, celebrates success and showcases the ongoing benefits of *GAPS Programme* activities around the world.
8. Promoting in-country specific programs (and local competitions) to build the capacity of local organisations in the region to deliver quality sport-based programs, with leadership provided by *GAPS Programme* champions and alumni.
9. Maximising researcher expertise to measure and document social and other impacts and outputs (e.g., trade, investment, and technology adoption) using consistent evaluation frameworks that provide a rigorous evidence base for understanding and identifying diplomatic outcomes that will support ongoing investment from and engagement with traditional diplomatic actors and networks.

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