

SACOS: TOWARDS PLAYER CONTROL?

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This brief article follows on the document 'A New Perspective and Direction for SACOS' which appeared in *Transformation* 6. It hopes to develop some of the issues raised in the document in a more concrete way and take the debate slightly further.

Since the October 1987 conference of SACOS (South African Council On Sport), two major issues have surfaced: the need for greater democracy within the organisation, and SACOS' relationship with wider community and political organisations. The two issues are, in the context, related.

The debate over the greater democratization of SACOS flows from a paper presented by Dr Errol Vawda of the South African Table Tennis Board (SATTB). The issues raised in the paper reflected a wider debate that has been raging within SACOS for the past two years about its precise role in a changing environment. The basic concern has been to deepen and widen SACOS' mass base.

To this end SACOS has made certain tactical shifts. The bans on campus sport and the use of 'international' hotels has been lifted. There is a recognition that sports organisations might in certain conditions be forced to negotiate through the Regional Services Councils. And recently there have been much more sensitive and realistic debates about such issues as the use of venues where permits apply; attendance at private schools; sponsorship, and so. In this context the call for greater democratization set out in the SATTB paper takes the debate further.

Ultimately, the changes in SACOS' approach have to be set against the background of three major developments.

Firstly, the emergence of strong trade union, political and community organisations in recent years. This has meant that SACOS' more overt political role, necessary in the past, has receded somewhat. As the 'sports wing of the liberation struggle' it has to adjust to the policies of the wider liberation movement. Moreover, with a less direct political role, the need for SACOS to organise sport itself more effectively and efficiently has come to the fore.

Secondly, the more the liberation struggle intensifies in the country, the

more glaring becomes the absence of a substantial following for SACOS in the African townships. On the other hand, people in the townships are beginning to show a greater interest in joining SACOS – and SACOS has to be sensitive to the needs of sports people in the townships. It has to therefore adjust its policies appropriately.

Thirdly, there is an increasing recognition amongst the SACOS leadership that the policies of SACOS have not sunk deeply into the mass of its members. There is a barrier between the leadership and the rank-and-file that has to be eroded.

RESTRUCTURING SACOS

It is this third issue that the SATTB paper addresses. It calls for a restructuring of SACOS to make it more democratic. Fundamentally it argues that it is the active sports players who must have control over SACOS and determine its direction.

Its main concrete proposals are:

- More than half the delegates to SACOS conferences should be active players
- At least half the SACOS officials should be active players.
- At least half the members of any sub-committee of SACOS should be active players.
- While officials may participate in debates, it is only active players who should vote on decisions.
- There should be a rotation of officials, with no person occupying the posts of president and secretary for more than two consecutive terms.
- Affiliates should be represented at conferences in proportion to their membership.
- Decisions taken at SACOS level should first be discussed at club level of the affiliates.

The SATTB is acutely aware that it will take a very long time indeed to, in practice, implement 'player control'. Crucially linked to this process, it stresses, is an extensive education programme. The SATTB calls for the appointment of full-time education officers whose main task will be to prepare players to assume greater control of SACOS and play leadership roles effectively.

The SATTB proposals basically derive from the experience of the trade union movement in this country. But this experience cannot, of course, be crudely translated to the sports terrain-which is fundamentally different in many respects. Clearly there is not the impetus for players to have control over sport as there is for workers to have over the labour process. The average sports player may not be particularly inclined to become active in conferences and the administration of sport – certainly not in the way a worker is involved in his or her union. Sports players may well regard their

greater involvement in the administration and control of sport as distracting from the time and energy they need to focus on developing their sporting skills.

On the issue of proportional representation of affiliates at SACOS meetings too, there are difficulties that will have to be addressed. How, for example, will the membership figures of the affiliates be verified. Will these figures include scholars or will they be represented by the school sports organisations?

How many members should each delegate at a conference represent. Given the enormous disparity in membership figures between affiliates, will proportional representation not have to be curtailed somewhat so that the smallest affiliates will not feel totally eclipsed by the largest ones?

Will the provincial councils of sports (which bring together the different affiliates at regional level) also be represented in proportion to their membership. If so, how will these membership figures be determined?

The SATTB paper might perhaps be too ambitious. Certainly there are many difficulties. But some of the proposals can easily be amended to make them more practical and practicable. For example, for the immediate future, SACOS can decide that one-third, instead of half, of the members of all its decision-making structures must comprise active sports players.

Whatever the difficulties, the principle of greater democratization and 'player control' is obviously sound. It is consistent with the general thrust in the country as a whole for popular control over every sphere of society.

If, for example, workers are preparing to take control over the workplace and students over education, surely sports players should be prepared to take greater control over the sports arena? It is on this basis that in time to come SACOS can begin to address the issues of how sport is to be organised in a post-apartheid, non-exploitative society. For the values underling sport as presently organised are not necessarily consistent with the creation of a truly liberated society.

EXPANDING SACOS MASS BASE

SACOS' ability to address such major questions and move forward is not just linked to an internal organisational task of deepening democracy. It is crucially related to its success in penetrating the townships and drawing the mass of African sport players into its folds.

However, given the dynamics in the townships, SACOS is not going to be able effectively to do this without the concerted support of political, community and trade union organisations that have a mass following in the townships. This obviously means organisations linked to the UDF and COSATU.

But there is no particular imperative for these organisations to give their full support to SACOS unless it establishes some sort of formal alliance

with them – and gives them the recognition that is due to them for having the support of the vast majority of the people in the townships.

SACOS has until now insisted that as a sports organisation made up of people who identify with different political organisations it cannot align itself with any particular political organisation or tendency.

However, in certain areas some of its affiliates, particularly rugby and soccer, and some of the provincial councils of sport, are coming under increasing pressure to align themselves with UDF-oriented organisations and COSATU.

Ebrahim Patel, president of the South African Rugby Board, put it so at a SACOS conference: 'For how long can we as SACOS remain neutral? There are various political organisations with different ideologies. They are competing for support. Surely we should go the way our members go? That is towards the UDF and the Congress movement. Do we as SACOS have the strength to remain on-aligned?'

The pressure on SACOS seems to come mainly in those areas where it has drawn a substantial number of sports people from the townships. And, on the other hand, others in the townships are not prepared to join SACOS unless it moves closer to the UDF-oriented organisations and COSATU. Certainly the South African Youth Congress made this clear to SACOS at its meeting with the UDF last year.

The argument of these organisations is that it is not fair of SACOS to give other political organisations with little support and organisational base in the townships the same status as the UDF and COSATU. SACOS is moving towards proportional representation of its affiliates as it recognises this to be more democratic. Surely, therefore, it should also relate to wider political and trade union organisations on the basis of their strength in numbers, organisational base and ideological support?

Moreover SACOS repeatedly speaks of the leadership role of the working class in the wider struggle and seeks in the long term to provide sport mainly to the working class. But where are the workers if not mainly in COSATU and the UDF organisations?

These organisations also argue that if SACOS is to become a truly mass organisation with the support of the people in the townships and if it gave the mass of its members the democratic right to decide on its non-alignment stance, it is hardly like that they will not choose to join the alliance between COSATU and UDF organisations.

SACOS is of course concerned about divisions within its ranks over this. There are ways, however, that it can seek to avoid this.

In the first instance, the issue of non-alignment could be opened up for the fullest discussion within all the structures of its affiliates from the rank and file players upwards. And before any decision is taken, a referendum could be held of all the members. If the majority decides on closer links

with the UDF-oriented organisations and COSATU, the minority will have to accept this.

Secondly, SACOS does not have to formally affiliate to the UDF-oriented movement. It can establish an alliance with this movement without doing so. For example, although COSATU has decided on a disciplined alliance with the UDF-oriented movement, it is not formally affiliated to it.

Thirdly, SACOS' alliance with UDF organisations and COSATU does not mean that it must not have any ties with other political and trade union organisations. It could set up a strategic alliance on a national basis with UDF organisations and COSATU, and tactical alliances with other smaller organisations in areas where they have a following and an organisational base.

An alliance with COSATU and UDF-oriented structures is organisationally necessary for SACOS if it is to penetrate the townships. SACOS might well have to finally decide what is more important: losing some members because of its alignment stance or winning a mass following in the townships?

But this question can only be meaningfully addressed if SACOS is guaranteed the full practical – not simply rhetorical – support of COSATU and UDF-oriented structures, recognising of course that some of these structures are in disarray at present and that sport is not necessarily very high up on the agenda of these organisations.

The onus would also lie on the UDF-oriented organisations and COSATU to deliver the goods if they want a disciplined alliance with SACOS. And they would of course also have to be sensitive to the specificity of the sports terrain – and not crudely subordinate SACOS to them and dictate to it.

The alliance will also be useful to the UDF-oriented organisations and COSATU. It will give them greater access to the sports arena – which is an important terrain of struggle. There are over two million people playing organised sport in this country – which is a significant constituency. With the State of Emergency and the recent restrictions on political activity, the role of sport and culture becomes even more important. This is reflected perhaps in the recent formation of the fledgling National Sports Congress.

The setting up of an alliance between SACOS and the UDF-oriented organisations and COSATU will of course not be an easy task. It is not necessarily immediately on the agenda either. And it should certainly not be done if it is going to seriously split SACOS down the middle.

But agreements within SACOS could be arrived at on some of the more practicable organisational tasks that the SATTB paper identifies. In attending to these tasks, however, the way will be paved for a meaningful alliance between the sports, political, and trade union movements in this country.