**Playing with policies**

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In our country, sports is not discussed frequently at the policy level. Yet the reality is that it is a major part of life, and should perhaps be even more significant in a nation where one in four people has diabetes and where the rate of cardiac diseases is amongst the highest in the world.

We need to encourage our children and young people to engage in sports. Once we have a ground-level base, we can choose from a pool of athletes who have the potential to reach the top in terms of performance and excellence. Pakistan has plenty of talent. There is no reason why these people would not emerge especially with support for sportspersons and proper structure in place; no matter what their discipline is, and where they are based. A proper policy needs to be devised for this.

In this context, the sudden decision by the prime minister and his team at a meeting of the Ministry of Interprovincial Coordination, which now oversees sports, to dismantle departmental teams is not wise. It is true that, ideally, sports should be structured on a regional basis, growing from school and club levels onto that of tehsils, districts, divisions, regions and provinces’. But since this is not the case in Pakistan, and has not been the case for years, we need to develop policies with more care, more thought, and more expert advices from people in positions who have experienced the benefits of departmental sports and can find a way to gradually phase it out – perhaps over a decade.

Currently, these departments employ thousands of sportspersons and provide for their livelihood and for whatever limited training and coaching they receive. Tearing this system down suddenly would not serve any purpose at all. We have seen it happen in the field of cricket, and there are former regional cricketers who have now become street vendors, selling inexpensive edible items just because they have no alternative. We do not want to see this happen to other sportspersons. Yet under the new policy, it is inevitable.

The federal government has repeatedly emphasised its desire to avoid unemployment. This should apply to sports as well.

The most extraordinary of all is to include the Higher Education Commission (HEC) in the restructuring process. The HEC looks after sports and extracurricular activities at universities, and sports departments at varsities are the nurseries that we need to produce sportspersons who can go on to bring pride to Pakistan at various levels.

Simply dismantling this structure will serve no purpose at all. It just shows how poorly the scheme has been thought out, with the services left out of the process of bringing apart the institutions which back sports and employ sportspersons.

In the past, sportspersons such as Javed Miandad, Islahuddin Siddique, Jehangir Khan and others have talked about how disastrous it would be to end departmental sports and leave poor sportsmen, who are in the majority in all fields of sports, without jobs and any source of income. It is also a fact that Imran Khan represented the department team of Pakistan International Airlines (PIA) for many years. And at that time, at least, departmental sports was fundamental to the country’s overall sports structure.

It is true that this structure should change with time. But ‘time’ here is the key word as is good planning and the need to make sure that petty politics and petty rivalries do not determine the fate of sportspersons across the country. A good structure needs proper planning; it needs discussion across a wide base of people, and it needs funding. Asking departments to fund regional teams would not work, and one can arguably say that people do not show as much excitement as they should in how the six regional teams that are now playing the T20 domestic tournament in different parts of the country perform.

Setting up a sporting structure is important because of the degree of excitement and unity sports provides to a country. We saw this when Talha Talib almost lifted his way to a medal at the Tokyo Olympics, despite a lack of support in terms of training and help. We saw the same when Arshad Nadeem threw his javelin, coming close to some of the world’s best. We should also understand that the reason why India claimed the gold medal in that event had to do with the effort put into the training of the javelin thrower who claimed the top place on the podium of the world’s biggest sporting event. The country hired foreign coaches to train him, and the athlete was sent abroad, as required, to help him hone his skills.

Pakistan has plenty of natural talent and potential. In fact, sports can play a huge part in offering some hope to young people and building a sense of pride in the country. We have seen this before, during the days when Pakistan took the medal stand at the Olympics in hockey and other sports. There was a time when Pakistani athletics were recognised at both regional and international levels.

Building a coherent structure is not a matter of days. We need documents and papers to understand precisely how the structure is being created and how this can be achieved in a manner to ensure that sportspersons are not harmed further. Cricketers have already suffered. There also needs to be some parity between the regions being set up, with Balochistan at the moment quite naturally likely to add – due to years of neglect – fewer sportspersons of calibre than other regions such as central Punjab, although with time this can be equalised to some degree. A sporting structure which works could largely emulate that put in place by India. The single ‘Khelo India’ programme looks at sports at the school level and takes it up to the recreational level, besides setting up centres of excellence for athletes who have the talent, commitment, and will to pursue the sport at the highest levels in the country. India has already shown some glimmers of light in what is possible for a country with the second largest population in the world to achieve. Perhaps new, far-reaching programme will help it do so.

Instead of depending on certain whims, fantasies and ideas that do not appear to be rooted in reality, Pakistan should be doing the same. There can be no sense in hurting sportspersons further. They need incomes to survive. And the idea that departments should pass on money to regions simply seems unrealistic. Even though we need more details about the programme and discussions at national forums, ill-thought-out planning and badly made policies will lead nowhere and not help us move forward, a reality we have sadly seen in other aspects of life as well.

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