July 2007 marks the launch of the second “Giving is Winning” campaign – a joint IOC-UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) project in the run-up to the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. Athletes, officials, members and supporters of the Olympic Movement are encouraged to donate sports and casual clothes which will then be distributed to various refugee camps around the globe. The collected items will enable the implementation of sporting activities in the camps and alleviate refugees’ difficult lives – especially those of young people. Sport generates joy and hope, facilitates dialogue, increases solidarity and, last but not least, can have a positive impact on health.

The success of the first “Giving is Winning” campaign during the 2004 Athens Olympic Games was a catalyst for the initiators to aim even higher and extend the action. Interviewees Nick Van Praag, Director of External Relations at UNHCR, and the IOC Director of International Cooperation and Development, Tommy Sithole, shed light on the project.

WHAT IS THE ORIGIN OF THE PROJECT?

Tommy Sithole: The project originated within the Association of National Olympic Committees of Africa (ANOCA) in 2001 in the run-up to the Afro-Asian Games in Hyderabad, India. ANOCA wanted to start a humanitarian activity to help those less fortunate in refugee camps, in particular by collecting clothes at the All Africa Games and the Asian Games. The plan never took off due to a lack of resources, but finally did, in a bigger way, as an IOC-UNHCR project at the Olympic Games 2004 in Athens.

WHAT IS THE VALUE OF THE PROJECT?

Nick Van Praag: There is a multitude of benefits. For the refugees in camps that have very little clothing, something more to wear is very meaningful. Equally important is that, even for a short while, NOCs and participating athletes can focus on the plight of the more than 20 million refugees and internally displaced in the world. This support for the UNHCR can have long-lasting effects.

Tommy Sithole: This project is like a moon rock. You cannot put a price tag to it – it is priceless. Its value is in the simple satisfaction of donors and the IOC that somewhere in this world some unfortunate person living in a refugee camp has not only been provided with something to wear, but more fundamentally – with hope. It was a major victory for our collaborators, the Athletes’ Commission in particular, to see the young athletes bringing a pair of trousers, a dress or a shirt for those needy others, even though some of them looked like they themselves could do with the items they were giving away.

WHAT HAS HAPPENED SINCE THE PROJECT STARTED?

Nick Van Praag: At the Athens 2004 Olympic Games, clothing was collected from participating athletes, officials and in bulk from a number of NOCs as well as some Olympic sponsors. The clothing was sent by the IOC mostly to Kosovo, Afghanistan, Eritrea, Tanzania and Azerbaijan. Celebrations took place in camps, followed by sport events. Refugees even organised their own “Olympic Games”.

Tommy Sithole: Yes, we collected thousands of pieces of clothing – it was a lot of work, but one which we enjoyed doing. As soon as we were finished, we thought about how to pursue and even to improve this project.

HOW CAN THE COOPERATION BETWEEN THE UNHCR AND THE IOC ADD VALUE TO SUCH A PROJECT?

Nick Van Praag: In reality, there is no other possibility for the UNHCR to give young refugees sports clothing with such an inherent meaning as the clothes coming from the Olympic family. The UNHCR is fortunate that the IOC has been cooperating with us for the past 13 years. And the “Giving is Winning” project was the highlight of 2004 and will be again for the Beijing Games.
FOCUS: THE IOC AND HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Tommy Sithole: The added value here first lies in the relationship between the two entities. The project does not only make the relationship tangible, it brings to life the fundamental principle of the IOC to “…place sport at the service of the harmonious development of man, with a view to promoting a peaceful society concerned with the preservation of human dignity.” The “Giving is Winning” campaign reflects the critical elements of the IOC’s mandate to society.

LOOKING BACK TO THE FIRST PROJECT DURING THE 2004 ATHENS OLYMPIC GAMES: WHAT ARE YOUR EXPECTATIONS FOR THE SECOND EDITION BEING LAUNCHED IN JULY 2007 IN THE LEAD-UP TO THE 2008 BEIJING OLYMPIC GAMES?

Nick Van Praag: The IOC’s idea to start the awareness and collection campaign already in 2007 in the run-up to the Olympic Games should result in a significant increase in the number of items of clothing going to refugees compared to the 2004 edition. We also want to build on the experience in Athens and create even greater awareness with the participating athletes in Beijing for the refugee cause. It is not far-fetched to consider Olympic athletes as part of a country’s future leadership. The UNHCR will benefit from this.

Tommy Sithole: We learnt a number of lessons from that first time, not least that we should start the collection of the items well in advance of the Games and ship them directly without having to bring everything to the host city of the Olympic Games. We are launching the project at the IOC Session in Guatemala City in July and following the recommendations of our President, Jacques Rogge, we have already started contacting potential big donors, NOCs and TOP sponsors. It is looking really good. We collected a little short of 30,000 pieces of clothing in 2004. Right now, months before the launch, we already have promises of around 10,000 items. We are loving it!

WHAT BENEFITS DOES SPORT BRING TO THE PEOPLE IN THE CAMPS?

Nick Van Praag: Young refugees have often suffered enormous atrocities. They have witnessed war first-hand, being captured or kidnapped and forced into armed conflict, becoming victims of sexual violence. They may have seen their parents murdered or they were separated from them in the panic and chaos of fleeing. Finally they made it to a refugee camp where problems continue. As children they often go unheard and unprotected. Some refugees are born in camps; others live and grow up in camps for years on end with little or no access to sport or recreation.

For refugees, sport provides a semblance of normality and structure to lives that are in disarray. It provides psychosocial benefits, presents an outlet that channels energy positively and builds attributes lasting a lifetime. This is especially valid for children fleeing from conflict situations. Sport develops tolerance, cooperation, an appreciation of rules. It motivates children to attend camp schools – this is particularly important for girls who are too often left out. It helps children regain a childhood lost.

Right: A German team member donates kit to the “Giving is Winning” campaign at Athens 2004.

IN RETROSPECT: ATHENS 2004 ‘GIVING IS WINNING’ IN NUMBERS

- Clothes collection for 20 days (from 9 to 29 August)
- 10,500 athletes and 5,000 officials invited to support the project
- 10,000 promotional leaflets in 7 languages
- 6 receptacles in the Olympic Village
- 30,000 donation-bags distributed to the athletes
- More than 27,000 items donated
- 3 days to sort, clean and pack the donations by 10 volunteers
- Beneficiary communities of refugees in 5 countries and 5 continents: Afghanistan, Eritrea, Tanzania, Kosovo and Azerbaijan
- More than 30,000 direct and 100,000 indirect beneficiaries

Right: A German team member donates kit to the “Giving is Winning” campaign at Athens 2004.