The dynamics of brand equity, co-branding and sponsorship in professional sports

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Abstract: Globalisation has been one of the most significant determinants of growth in the sports industry worldwide, especially with the increasing importance of brand creation, brand awareness, brand image, brand identity and brand equity. Professional sports teams have become top sports brands through leverage with major company sponsors. Sports marketers have had to become much more entrepreneurial to create competitive advantage for sports organisations and deliver relationship value to consumers. Company sponsorships are prominent drivers of brand strategy around the world. They help create an extended consumer experience and are becoming a strategic vehicle for creating co-branding partnerships between sports organisations and multinational companies.

This study reports data from a survey of the top marketing and communications executives in sports and company organisations in New Zealand and as well as a qualitative content analysis of core documents and websites. The study provides insights for sports marketers seeking to:
• use sponsorship as a prominent driver of brand strategy
• employ co-branding as a strategy to create an extended consumer experience
• build strong brands through efficient co-branding articulation strategies.

The study also provides recommendations for sports organisations and companies to formulate their marketing communications and brand strategies from the perspective of a co-branding relationship.

Keywords: brands; co-branding; brand equity; sponsorship; professional sports; sport management; marketing.


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1 Introduction

Playing sports not only imparts physical skills but it also contributes an abundance of life skills such as team building, leadership, challenge, triumph, failure, humanity, sportsmanship, fragility, belonging, and comradeship (Kahle and Riley, 2004). The unique relationship that we have with sports is one of the reasons that teams are able to attract huge sponsorship deals and has led to keen competition for the sports consumer dollar. In the USA alone, sports is the 11th largest industry estimated at US$30 billion and growing at 9% annually (Bathgate, 2005).

Consequently, sports companies must become more proactive and entrepreneurial in the marketplace in order to achieve competitive advantage. Entrepreneurial marketing is “the proactive identification and exploitation of opportunities for acquiring and retaining profitable customers through innovative approaches to risk management, resource leveraging and value creation” (Morris et al., 2002). For sports marketers it all comes down to relationships. In relationship marketing, emphasis is placed on building longer term relationships with customers rather than on individual transactions. It involves understanding the customers’ needs as they go through their life cycles with a sporting enterprise (e.g., Bejou and Palmer, 2006; Buttle, 1996; Hougaard and Bjerre, 2002).

This study draws generalisations to the entire sporting world by focusing on football (also known as soccer), now played in 205 countries. This is a sport with huge economic and business dimensions, and sponsorship is widely used as a central driver of company brand strategy through co-branding partnerships (Beech et al., 2000; Morgan and Summers, 2005; Cliffe and Motion, 2005).

Sports marketing is about “buying and selling audiences” (McDaniel, 2002; Trail et al., 2003). Sports marketers create, develop and articulate targeted advertising themes and promotional campaigns in order to persuade consumers to increase their consumption of sports products and services. Sports market researchers have had to develop sophisticated market segmentation techniques for two reasons: Sports fans have consumption profiles that are different from the general public; and different sports also have different fan profiles (James and Ross, 2004; Kwon and Trail, 2001).

In this study we examine co-branding relationships in one ‘sports-crazy’ country, New Zealand, known particularly for its rugby and cricket. Rather than choosing to survey rugby or cricket managers and executives, we picked New Zealand football. It is a growing sport and it is a manageable research topic. It is also not yet distorted by the mega-deals in rugby and cricket. We believe that narrowing down the topic nonetheless allows for generalisation about the global sports branding environment. New Zealand and its sporting environment are similar to patterns elsewhere, yet its scale allows for more granularised examination.

2 Objectives and hypotheses

The purpose of the research is to evaluate the concept of co-branding equity and its strategic articulation. We focus on the marketing communication strategies used by New Zealand professional football (soccer) teams to build equity and to maximise brands in a co-branding relationship with business partners. We seek to understand what underpins co-branding arrangements and how brand values are leveraged and promoted to the
benefit of both partners. We seek as well to examine the sources of co-brand equity and particularly how its components are enhanced in the relationship between sporting and business organisations. As this is an exploratory study in an un-researched area in New Zealand, we wanted to see if New Zealand business and sports marketing managers described the same phenomenon found in the literature. We also wanted to see whether these findings might generalise to other world contexts.

3 Literature review

Drawing upon previous authors (Ferkins and Garland, 2006; Meerabeau et al., 1991; Sleight, 1989; Walliser, 2003), we define sports sponsorship as having five components: Sports sponsorship is a business relationship between a sports team and a company in return for rights used for commercial advantage. Summarising the literature (Dolphin, 2003; Ferkins and Garland, 2006; Liu et al., 1998; Sleight, 1989; Walliser, 2003), sponsorship can be seen as a ‘flexible and diverse’ medium that enables company to:

- build brands and increase brand awareness
- enhance company image and leverage company reputation
- stimulate sale of products and services to increase sales
- reinforce advertising and media exposure
- address new target audiences and markets and community relations
- entertain clients and customers
- reward company personnel
- undertake corporate social and responsibility and hospitality.

Sponsorship and advertising should be distinguished from one another since they deliver their messages in different ways to different market segments (Mason, 2005; Meenaghan, 2001a). Advertising messages are generally more direct, explicit and more easily controlled (Cornwell et al., 2005) and ads have a shorter-lived effect (Cornwell et al., 2005; Dolphin, 2003; Meenaghan, 2001b). Sponsorships are more cost-effective, have longer-term impacts, provide material support to sports teams, and generate community goodwill. There are two kinds of sponsorship. On-the-field sponsorship includes placement of logo on sports equipment and/or clothing or billboards at the scene of the event as well as endorsements of players. Broadcasting sponsorship includes advertisements in print, radio, television and/or the internet (Liu et al., 1998; Mason, 2005; Schaaf, 2004; Sleight, 1989).

Entrepreneurial marketing processes can be strategically employed by a sporting enterprise to create, discover, assess, and exploit entrepreneurial opportunities more effectively and efficiently. Entrepreneurial marketing is the pursuit of opportunity, the obsession with the customer, and a focus on relationships. In addition to brand recognition and market share, the entrepreneurial marketer concentrates on relationships (Gumpert, 2002). Given the unpredictable behaviour of some athletes and sporting companies, entrepreneurial marketing means learning how to balance risk against
visibility and exposure (Miles and Darroch, 2006; Miles, 2008). Sports marketers must constantly unveil bold, provocative marketing campaigns without breaking too far from marketing approaches of the past. As we moved into the research, it was important to define our other concepts:

- A brand is a company asset (typically a name, a word, a sign, or symbol) that communicates meaning and identity and that differentiates a product or services from competitors (Kotler, 2003, p.418) (Aaker, 1991; Couvelaere and Richelieu, 2005; Keller and Lehmann, 2006).
- A company brand is a representation of an organisation’s identity and value system (Balmer, 2001; de Chernatony and Riley, 1998; Motion et al., 2003).
- Brands have core values intrinsic to the core ideology (Balmer, 2001) and extended values, which create depth and texture across global markets (Uggl, 2006).
- Brand equity is a set of assets that add value to the product or service (Aaker, 1991, p.15). The two components of brand equity (Cornwell et al., 2005) are brand awareness and brand image.
- Brand leveraging can be defined as the strategy of capitalising, exploiting or enhancing established brand equity (Keller and Lehmann, 2006; Uggl, 2006).
- Co-branding is a collaboration of two (or more) brands with significant customer recognition to promote an existing or new product or service to the benefit of both partners (Blackett and Boad, 1999; Motion et al., 2003; Washburn et al., 2000). Co-branding builds and maintains the competitive advantage of participant brands (Leuthesser et al., 2003).

Constructing a co-branding association or relationship between a sports team and a company begins by identifying a common ground between participant brands (Lebar et al., 2005; Motion et al., 2003). The articulation of the anticipated new merged outcome needs to be planned and needs to occur simultaneously for both partners at ideological, strategic, tactical and emotional levels (StrategicDirection, 2002; 2004) across a range of media. It is important that possible previous associations be disarticulated and that the new association is clearly articulated to the consuming public. Shared value is the critical aspect of a co-branding association (Motion et al., 2003). The greater the core values that partners share, the bigger is the potential increase in equity of any co-branded product or service (Jones, 2004).

Sponsorship provides an ideal platform from which co-branding can be leveraged (Cliffe and Motion, 2005) by adding value through intrinsic feel-good benefits or extrinsic benefits such as televised broadcasts and print exposures (Hill and Vincent, 2006).

In this study we borrowed heavily from Young and Rubicam’s Brand Asset Value (BAV) measure. BAV operationalises ‘Shared Value Creation’ by looking at the key components of brand equity, namely differentiation, relevance, esteem, and knowledge. BAV is the most extensive worldwide study of brands and their relationships and has proven validity and reliability (Kotler and Keller, 2006).
4 Research methodology and design

We used content analysis of texts as well as an expert survey in order to understand the context in which co-branding relationships are formed and how they are inter-related. We collected data on the following organisations.

- Sports organisations from New Zealand included Rugby Union, Golf, Netball, Cricket, Football (Soccer), Bowls, Tennis, and Touch Rugby.
- Sponsors came from the electronics, bank/finance, apparel, automobile, beverage, airline, telecomm, and broadcast industries.\(^1\)

Content analysis examined 80 newspaper articles and several dozen websites. Using NVivo-7, we analysed images and texts depicting the vision, mission, values, brand principles and giving guidelines of companies involved in a sports co-branding relationship.

Our sample of survey respondents was selected from popular football teams and their sponsors that had a base in New Zealand. All chosen companies were involved in co-branding with a sports team, and all sports organisations supported elite and popular sports teams in New Zealand with significant business sponsorships.

A 21 question survey was distributed to 45 marketing and communication managers of 9 sports organisations and 36 multi-national companies based in New Zealand whose contact details we gleaned from public sources. We had an 80% response rate to the survey, which we believe significantly covers the area of research in question.

5 Findings

From this sample of New Zealand organisations, rugby had eleven sponsoring companies. In second place were netball and football (soccer), each with five sponsors. Examined the other way around, insurance/finance companies sponsored five sports each. Consumer electronics, apparel, and airline companies had on average four sports sponsorships each. Telecommunication companies sponsored only one sport (the largest, rugby). Those willing to reveal the size of their sponsorship clustered around US$1–US$5 million annually. The time period of the co-branding relationships examined was typically about five years.

Asked to name the top reasons for starting and maintaining their co-branding relationships, 35% of respondents (combined company and sports managers) indicated that ‘strategic value’ was the most important. ‘Emotional value’ rated at 20%, ‘financial value’ was 17%, while ‘ideological value’ rated 15%.

‘Innovation and creativity’ was seen as the most important core synergistic brand value in a co-branding relationship (Table 1). Other highly rated core synergistic values were ‘culture and tradition’ and ‘entertainment and fun’. Interestingly, ‘integrity’ had the lowest frequency of mention.

When asked to pick the top benefit of co-branding (Table 2), two groups of values emerged as themes:

1. media coverage and advertising, increased sales or popularity, increased radio/TV audience
2. profile enhancement and brand dimensions.
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Table 1  Core synergistic values in a co-branding relationship

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Values</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Innovation and creativity</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Culture and tradition</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Entertainment and fun</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commitment</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passion</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excellence</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inspiration</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community focus</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenge and competition</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrity</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2  Top benefit from a co-branding relationship

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benefits</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Media coverage and advertising</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profile enhancement</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand dimensions</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased sales or popularity</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased radio/TV audience</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Product development</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stakeholder relations</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospitality</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotion</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internal marketing or employee relations</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When asked to pick the one most important strategic goal of such a relationship (Table 3), respondents focused on brand awareness (31%) followed by brand experience and brand image.

Table 3  Strategic goals of co-branding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Goals</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brand awareness</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand experience</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand image or personality</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goodwill</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brand loyalty</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Asked to pick the key brand equity component that would compel a partner to enter a co-branding relationship (Table 4), esteem and differentiation were the most important components.

Table 4  Key equity component compelling a co-branding relationship

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Equity component</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Differentiation</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Esteem</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of the brand</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relevance</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Asked which types of promotional events were most preferred (Table 5), sporting events are most often mentioned (44%) to articulate co-branding associations. Another current trend is to sponsor business events (28%).

Table 5  Types of promotional events

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Event types</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sporting events</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business events</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade events</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community events</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Respondents were asked what they believed were the main sources of equity leveraging in a co-branding relationship (Table 6). About two-thirds picked either access to the brand strategy of the partner or marketing communication strategy as the main sources of co-branding equity.

Table 6  Sources of co-brand equity leveraging

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sources</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Access to the brand strategy of co-branded partner</td>
<td>36.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing communication association</td>
<td>32.69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alignment of company brand values</td>
<td>17.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reach of the co-brand</td>
<td>11.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>1.92</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We were interested to hear the respondents’ views on the preferred type of sponsorship arrangement in a co-branding relationship. The leading preference is to be the main or official team sponsor. However, commercial and media partnership were also frequently mentioned.
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Table 7

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Arrangement</th>
<th>Percentage (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Main or official sponsor</td>
<td>36.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial partners</td>
<td>31.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media or broadcast sponsor</td>
<td>17.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others</td>
<td>6.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical sponsors or supplier</td>
<td>4.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Premium, classic or gold partners</td>
<td>4.26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The computer-assisted qualitative content analysis examined hundreds of newspapers articles and website pages. Our purpose was to examine manifest content in these documents that depicted the vision, mission, values, and brand principles of companies involved in a co-branding relationship. Paraphrasing in their own words, here are the themes that emerged from our documentary analysis.

- We articulate our brand through sponsorship of fine sports organisations.
- We concentrate on brand values to build brand portfolio. Brand value emerges in our statements about performance, passion, integrity, and diversity.
- Through these relationships we define who we are and what we strive to be each day. We are honest and ethical businesses that harness diverse ideas and strengths.
- Our joint brand equity is the value of our brand names. Through brand equity we seek to show how we are associated with the world’s most recognised sports teams and to increase that awareness in our home countries and abroad.
- Celebrity endorsements are the driving force for any game. We thank our celebrities for their efforts to promote the game.
- Money has changed the landscape of sports forever. Naming rights for sports venues is an important form of brand exposure.
- Embracing diversity, doing creative things and maximising potential expresses what we do.
- Sports sponsorship works across the globe. It can improve a region’s image (e.g., the Gulf), drive tourism and alleviate dependency on oil and natural gas.
- Sports sponsorship has an impact on share price. (For example, Sports Direct’s shares dived 16% after England’s failure to qualify for the 2008 European soccer championship.)
- Like our business, we want our teams to win at all costs.

6 Discussion

Our findings may have sampled New Zealand teams and sponsors, but we venture that the results can be generalised more broadly because of their resonance with the literature. New Zealand is a ‘sports-crazy’ country. It is relatively wealthy, has huge
sports attendance, has numerous companies interested in leveraging their brands nationally and internationally, is highly competitive in world sports, and extensively uses co-branding and sports sponsorships.

Strategic value is the key to entering into a co-branding relationship; with innovation and creativity seen as the most important core synergistic brand values. Brand dimensions, enhancement of brand profile and media coverage and advertising are principal benefits and/or objectives of a co-branding relationship. Differentiation of the brand through sponsorship of sports gives a competitive advantage. Brand profile awareness coupled with access and reach of the marketing communication is the strategy used by most companies within a co-branding association. Sponsoring a national team or being the main sponsor of an event gives maximum utility to the resources invested in a co-branding relationship. Qualitative analysis shows the importance of brand communication, brand value, brand value (equity and global appeal), celebrity brand image, money influencing sport, overseas sports investment, and winning at all costs.

Looking at the survey as a whole, the top benefits of co-branding are:

- Brand dimensions
- Media coverage and advertising
- Increased broadcasting audience
- Profile enhancement
- Increased sales and popularity.

7 Company-team nexus

To corroborate our results, we looked at the phenomenon of sports sponsorship and co-branding around the world as of late 2007. In this section we outline events that provide external validation for our findings so that we can generalise beyond the New Zealand circumstance.

- It is clear that many companies (American International Group (AIG), Hyundai, Emirates, Carlsberg, Sony and Adidas, to name a few) intend further to globalise their brand recognition to sports co-branding (Rothacher, 2004).

- Carlsberg’s philosophy of sponsorship is to get consumers involved and engaged in the brand. To Carlsberg, sports is the unique medium through which consumers are exposed to the brand in an entertaining and pleasant environment (Carlsberg, 2007).

- Sony Corporation believes their products deliver dreams and new forms of enjoyment to customers and that sports sponsorship heightens awareness and respect for the Sony brand (Sony, 2007).

- Emirates and Hyundai emphasise that their co-branding association with football associations such as FIFA (Fédération Internationale de Football Association) and Union of European Football Associations (UEFA), respectively, has not only boosted their brand awareness but also helped create a brand character and association that generate real passion and emotion from consumers (Emirates, 2007;
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Hyundai, 2007). In addition, through its deal with FIFA from 2007 to 2014, Emirates benefits from enhanced global media exposure at FIFA’s special events and development initiatives.

- Heineken has extended its sponsorship association with the UEFA Champions League due to the fact that with over 4 billion viewers per season in 227 nations around the world, the premier sporting event has become truly global and fits perfectly with the Heineken brand (Heineken, 2007; Wilson et al., 2007).

- Emirates, Sony Ericsson and Westpac look at getting closer to the community through their contribution of funds to stadium building, and they visualise that sports sponsorship is especially a great way of doing it.

- Qantas airline regularly takes 50 frequent flyers on ‘changing room tours’ at the Wallabies home matches in Australia (South, 2007) with the groups given replica Wallaby jumpers and walked around the atmospheric changing room to create a passion for their team and long-term association within the next generation.

- The New Zealand Rugby Union along with their sponsors Adidas set up an innovative example in brand leverage by arranging an hour-long autograph session that attracted thousands of fans before their departure to the World Cup in France (Drinnan, 2007).

- Sony Corporation’s global partnership programme contract with FIFA running from 2007 to 2014 with a contract value of US$305 million enables Sony Corporation to exercise various rights as an official sponsor of over 40 FIFA events (Sony, 2007).

- As a FIFA partner, Sony will be able to exclusively promote advertising and marketing activities; with other rights include advertising boards in stadiums, TV sponsor credits and preferential negotiation rights for TV commercial spots.

- Nike believes in the power of sports to develop a new approach to philanthropy and it intends to invest a minimum of $315 million in grants, product donations and in-kind support through 2011 to resurface old playing fields, fund community-based programmes and help young people create their own communities (Nike, 2007).

- Vodafone (2007) believes that sports and music are the two passions of life that cut through all barriers and understood in unique ways and invest heavily in events and sports teams throughout the world.

- The humiliating defeat of England against Croatia for the Euro qualification is estimated to cost British retailers £600 million ($1.2 billion).

- Shares in Umbro, which also acknowledged that its sales of replica England shirts would be severely hit, slumped by 3.7% in midday trading in London. Another sports retailer JJB Sports share fell by 3.3%.

- In New Zealand, All Blacks shirt and principal sponsor Adidas expected a substantial loss in its balance sheets in the year 2007 due to the All Blacks loss at the quarterfinals of the Rugby World Cup 2007.
8 Conclusion

The main objectives that underpin a co-branding relationship and/or association with the context of sports sponsorship are brand portfolio (brand dimensions and profile enhancement) and media exposure (advertising and broadcasting). Community awareness and creation of goodwill are also considered important for a long-term relationship. A combination of innovative and flexible leverage options depend on the market segment. Differentiation and esteem are the key components of brand equity. The longer the duration of a co-branding association, the greater would be the impact on brand image. Access to brand strategy as well as the extent and reach of the marketing communication platform are seen as key sources of co-branding equity.

We believe this study adds to the body of academic studies on co-branding, sponsorship and brand leverage. It also adds to the emerging literature linking entrepreneurship to sports marketing. Future research needs to investigate as many sports as possible because different sports have different audiences and thus require different types of co-branding and sponsorship. The cultural aspect could be significant to the alignment of brand values in a co-branding association. In addition, we believe that the present study provides valuable information on the role of business sponsorship in a co-branding relationship and the strategies of articulation to build a strong sports brand. The study should also be useful to companies in formulating their marketing communications and brand strategies with a co-branding relationship perspective.

Sports marketers must be ‘fleet afoot’ within the business environment. Perhaps future research can sports sponsorship from the entrepreneurial perspective within a large sporting organisation. In this sense sports marketers are more like ‘intrapreneurs’, a term used to describe the entrepreneurial behaviour of people within large firms and organisations.

9 Limitations

The present research study provides insights for sports marketers to use sponsorship as a prominent driver of brand strategy, to have co-branding as a strategy to create an extended consumer experience and to build strong brands through efficient articulation strategies. However, the main limitations of this study are sample constraints, generalisations and first-hand information, due to the fact that primary research across all sports is prohibitive. In addition, some of our analysis was dependent on a range of secondary sources available in the public domain.

References


Note