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Sports as a Tool for Refugee Empowerment

*“Do not think you are doing good by sending knitting,
sewing and basket-weaving materials down here for the girls.
When they sit quietly and sew, they remember the horrors that made them refugees.
They do not need sewing now; they desperately need the joyful therapy
that only group sports and play can bring.
It transports them to a normal world. It helps them forget. It heals.
Please don't forget the girls.”¹*

These words were a fervent plea requested by a Sudanese refugee woman in charge of a volleyball program for girls in Kakuma refugee camp, Kenya, to visiting International Olympic Committee (IOC) delegates. Since 1996, the IOC has partnered with the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR) to support sport programs such as the Kakuma volleyball program. To date, UNHCR also has partnerships with ten NGO sports programs, impacting millions in countries across the world affected by displacement.² Although life as a refugee is marked with physical, psychological, and emotional strife, sports programs enhance the quality of life and improve the psychosocial development of refugees, in particularly youth.

Background Scope of the Problem:

The ramifications of displacement, war, conflict, natural disaster, and violence are appreciable, resulting in the mistrust of other cultures, the disruption of students' education, (causing students to miss out on any health education, in particular, that they would normally receive), and dismantlement of families, leaving people with physical, mental, and emotional trauma. Trauma occurs when people are exposed to a life-threatening event, causing feelings of horror, fear, or helplessness to ensue.³ Additionally, refugees often face a lack of hope, loss of morale, and

idleness at camps. Furthermore, refugees face the loss of loved ones, loss of security or safety, lose a sense of normalcy and experience stress.⁴ The ramifications of such dire situations can include refugees turning to drug use, participating in or being recruited for armed conflict, or utilizing sexual and domestic violence as a coping mechanism for anger, resentment, fear, isolation, depression, or loss. If young people, in particular, are not adequately protected and offered sufficient opportunities to learn skills required to live productive, independent lives, they are likely to contribute to the next round of conflict.⁵ Instead of resorting to these outlets, UNHCR has offered an alternative intervention: participation in sports.

Framework for Sport as a Human Right and Introduction to Sports' Contribution Toward the MDGS:

TABLE 6.1 SPORT, PEACE AND THE MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOAL	CONTRIBUTION OF SPORT
1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Engagement of socially excluded groups — often the very poor — helping them to build their human capital, connecting them with supports and services, and facilitating their social reintegration Use of high-profile athletes and sport events to highlight structural causes of poverty and social exclusion and to advocate for solutions Breaking down negative community perceptions of excluded groups that contribute to their ongoing social and economic marginalization Support for reintegration of ex-combatants, including access to skills training to help them secure jobs
2. Achieve universal primary education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encouragement and support for orphans, street children, former child combatants and other vulnerable children to enroll in school
3. Promote gender equality and empower women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Opportunities for female refugees and newcomers to enjoy physical activity and social interaction, and access information and services to support their temporary or permanent transition into a new community Support for the reintegration of girls who are former child combatants, helping them to recover from trauma and regain their self-esteem, sense of control over their bodies, and hope for the future
4. Reduce child mortality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Connecting families in socially excluded groups to health information and services Truce opportunities during the Olympic Games that permit immunization efforts and humanitarian aid to proceed in conflict zones
5. Improve maternal health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Connecting mothers from socially excluded groups, including those who have become mothers as a result of rape, to health information and services
6. Develop a global partnership for development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Creation of global sport and peace networks for awareness-raising and knowledge exchange

The United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) adopted sport as a human right in Article 1 of the 1978 Charter of Physical Education and Sport.⁶ Similarly, in 1989, The U.N. formally recognized play as one of the rights of every child through Article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.⁶ Rooted in play, sports move beyond a recreational activity when applied in programmatic settings as a means for development and refugee empowerment. Noteworthy is sports' ability to contribute to each of the six Millennium Development Goals (MDG), as noted in table 6.1.⁷ Albeit not a panacea, when used as a tool for

change, sports programs can aid refugees in terms of poverty eradication (by providing employment), achieving universal primary education (serving an incentive for children to enroll in school), the promotion of gender equity (by challenging societal gender norms), reducing child mortality (by utilizing sports competitions as a platform to market health promotion messages), improving maternal mortality (by involving mothers from socially excluded groups into sport activities), and, finally, sport can aid global development (through the creation of sport and peace networks and conferences).⁷

Key Partners and Their Contributions:

Within the context of refugee camps, this unfolds through partnerships and their programs. Key partners include Nike, Microsoft, United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Task Force on Sport for Development, Right to Play, United Nations Office for Sport for Development and Peace (UNOSDP) and the aforesaid IOC. Although there are many additional sports-related development non-governmental organizations, nonprofits, and grassroots organizations, honing in on each of these aforementioned organizations and their programs will demonstrate the effectiveness of sport as an intervention among refugee populations, hopefully galvanizing other NGOs, CBOs and FBOs (community based organizations and faith-based organizations) to continue with their work in providing opportunities for refugees' sport involvement.

The IOC, one of the premier partners of UNHCR since 1996, has contributed to refugee development through an array of initiatives, including the coordination of sports camps on refugee bases, distribution of sports equipment, and health campaigns. Most recently, the IOC utilized the 2012 Olympic Games as a platform to promote the "Giving is Winning" campaign, aiming to collect 100,000 articles of sports-related and casual clothing for displaced persons

namely in South Sudan, Bangladesh, and Ethiopia. Similar campaigns were organized during the 2004 and 2008 Olympics, thus garnering public attention to the needs of displaced persons across the world. The 2004 and 2008 donations totaled over 100,000 articles of clothing that reached 14 countries.^{8,9}

A strong supporter of refugees, there are many examples of exemplary IOC-UNHCR partnership programs. Since 1997, the IOC and UNHCR have partnered to provide educational services, thus contributing toward MDG 2 by working in Bhutanese refugee camps in Nepal to offer structured sport and recreational activities for refugees. Education is voluntary for most refugees, as they are not citizens of their host countries. Anecdotal evidence from UNHCR shows that including physical activity and team sports as part of school curriculum and activities attracts new groups of students to school (especially girls) that otherwise would not attend. Sports programs have shown to increase student attendance rates and reduce antisocial and disruptive behavior, such as violence.⁶

IOC projects can be seen throughout the world in vulnerable, war-torn areas, including Kenya, the Balkans, Nepal, Rwanda, Guinea, and Tanzania. Programs have been in place in each of these countries to integrate refugees with local host populations, thus contributing to a sense of belonging and peace. After peace is established, the IOC continues to commit to communities to reestablish social structures. For example, in 1998, the IOC and UNHCR began peace-launching efforts in Tanzania by initiating a sport program in six refugee camps populated by Congolese, Rwandese and Burundian refugees. The combined population of these camps was 200,000. The IOC project provided equipment and basic infrastructure, as well as uniforms, training, and materials for coaches and supervisors, enabling school children, youth groups, and adults to take part in social and recreational activities, thus fostering an environment of healing and growth

rather than stagnation or hopelessness.

This restoration of hope and healing was also experienced through IOC efforts in East Timor.

When peace returned to this nation, the IOC worked with the UN and local leaders to rebuild sports facilities on the island. Since the conflict interrupted the training of athletes preparing for the 2000 Olympic Games, the IOC worked with international sports federations to identify qualified athletes and funded their travel and training to Sydney. This created the opportunity for four East Timorese athletes to compete in the games, thus providing role models for youth in East Timor and establishing a sense of normalcy and achievement in a group that had experienced defeat.¹⁰

Finally, an on-going IOC activity that supports refugees is an IOC, Samsung and UNHCR sports kit initiative. Each sports kit accommodates a population of 1,000 people with sports-related equipment. These kits can be used immediately for implementation in current refugee situations or they can be used for any future displacement circumstances. This creates a more positive atmosphere for refugees, enabling them to experience a transition into normalcy much quicker, providing a physical and social outlet as well as respite from an otherwise dire and often times precarious environment, thus regaining a sense of security.¹¹

Similarly, the NGO Right to Play has amplified the UN's recognition of play as the right of every child through sport in disadvantaged populations, including former child combatants and refugees. Headquartered in Toronto, Canada, this program focuses on the four main areas of education, health, peace building, and community development. Before initiating a country program, Right to Play staff conduct a thorough needs and assets assessment. Upon conclusion of this stage, Right to Play partners with community resources and community members, including educators, parents, and children to implement programs in the four main areas listed

above. After implementation, Right to Play conducts monitoring and evaluation assessment to improve programs' effectiveness. Engaging 835,000 youth in over 20 countries as of 2010, Right to Play's impact in refugee communities is palpable. In a 2010 evaluation, 84% of children in Liberia reported knowing how to solve a peer-related conflict peacefully. Similarly, teachers in Pakistan incorporating Right to Play's programs in their schools reported a decrease in peer-to-peer school violence. Within Pakistan, Right to Play works primarily in Peshawar and Quetta, where the vast majority of Afghani refugees reside. Since the inception of Right to Play's work in these communities in 2002, staff reports a dramatic increase in school enrollment amongst refugees as well as enhanced positive relations between the Pakistani and Afghan communities.¹² Many of these organizations and local less-known CBOs utilize sport with refugees as a means of promoting public service messages. Sports practices and events can creatively be used as a platform for communication about health-related campaigns, such as HIV/AIDS awareness, disease prevention, immunization promotion, and landmine dismantlement. Sports venues provide a cost-effective way to promote health messages to a high number of community members at once.⁷

US-Based Sport Initiatives:

The United States has contributed to many of the aforementioned programs and has also developed some of their own in order to capitalize on the impact of sports in the developing world, especially refugees. The United States Agency for International Development (USAID) officially recognizes sports' ability to advance development and peace agendas in addition to supporting the physical, psychological, emotional, and social development of peoples throughout the developing world in their report entitled "The Role of Sports as a Development Tool."¹³ With support from USAID, Mercy Corps overcame political barriers to bring together people from

Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan in the Fergana Valley Youth Basketball League. Mercy Corps utilizes a “participatory approach,” in which target communities experiencing the effects of displacement set their own agendas, raise their own resources and implement programs themselves, as to renew hope, confidence and skills to continue the development of refugees in a sustainable manner. Mercy Corps has implemented sports projects similar to the Fergana Valley Youth Basketball league in countries across the world. Upon early evaluation of children's emotional status in the Darfur, Sudan refugee camps confirmed an overwhelming need for a secure place for their play and extracurricular education. Partnering with refugee camp leaders, Mercy Corps 24 child-friendly spaces in the camps and trained more than 70 young adults to supervise the areas. This provides safe spaces and infrastructure for sports recreation to help children deal with the psychosocial impacts of displacement.

Similarly, Peace Players International (PPI), a Washington D.C. based non-profit, uses basketball as a tool for engaging Catholic and Protestant children in Northern Ireland, bringing them together on and off the court to engage interfaith dialogue and peacemaking. Likewise, PPI utilizes this same approach in Israel and the West Bank, using basketball as a tool for experiential learning combined with frank open discussion. PPI’s programs bring together groups of people who would normally not associate with one another. This can break down stereotypes and prevent ethnic clashes, thus aiming to prevent violence, cultural tensions, and refugee displacement.¹³

Recommendations:

In order to continue such efficacious programs, there are several recommendations set forth to advance the promotion of sport as an effective tool in addressing the physical and psychosocial needs of refugees. In 2003, UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Sport for Development and Peace

recommended that sports be further integrated into development agendas. This includes the incorporation of sport and physical activity into international development policies. Additionally, they recognized partnerships as the most effective way to use sport for development and peace. This increases communication and resource allocation amongst stakeholders, such as government, sports organizations, sports-related development agencies, NGOs, and the private sector.⁶

Furthermore, in May 2011, The Sport and Development for Peace forum in Geneva created recommendations including a call on the UN to include access to sport and physical education as an indicator in its human development indexes as well as a call for common evaluation tools to monitor the impact of sport on social and economic development.¹⁴

Based upon the Swiss Agency for Development reviews, additional recommendations are to utilize local coaches who have at least some psychosocial training. This can be provided and taught to interested coaches and will increase the effectiveness of sport as an intervention to ameliorate refugee trauma. By implementing staff or volunteers who have experienced or been affected by the cause of displacement, athletes will be mentored by someone who understands the tragedy and its meaning with the local context (including religion, culture, and language). It is crucial, however, that the individual have the skills to address his or her own trauma experience before assisting others.³

Similarly, sports development agencies will be more effective if they work in cooperation with local NGOs, as they are more familiar with the specific needs of the affected populations, including an understanding of the local context.

The timing of a sports intervention also needs to be considered when implementing such programs. Generally speaking, the most efficacious time for implementation of sports

programming is between four months and two years after the disaster event. This gives proper time during the rescue phase (the first week post-disaster) for survival measures to be established, as well time to continue the sustainability of emergency effort in the inventory stage (week two post-disaster through the fourth month post-disaster). Implementing sports programs during this time could interfere with or detract from emergency efforts. In the preceding disillusionment phase (four months through two years post-disaster) when refugees shift their focus from imminent needs to recognizing feelings of depression, grief, and loss, sports can provide stabilizing the effects of trauma.³

Finally, more reporting, monitoring, and program evaluation is needed to promote the benefits of sports in refugee populations. Currently, empirical evidence in sports programs is lacking, and there are not universal approaches for evaluation of sports as development programs, in particular, those that specifically address trauma. This would be beneficial to discuss at upcoming sport and development conferences, such as the June 2013 International Forum on Sport for Peace and Development, organized by the IOC and the United Nations Office on Sport and Development for Peace (UNOSDP). Cost analyses need to be performed to demonstrate to current or prospective constituents that contributing to the development of refugees through sport is a worthwhile and effective means of investing capital and energy. Once evidence based programs have been firmly established, current or prospective supporters may consider expanding sports programs to other age groups that have not been included in most research, such as young adults and adults. Creating opportunities for sports participation for each member in a household, including both females and males as well as adults and children, could foster a greater sense of hope and healing, as children will often look to parents for guidance on how to respond to crisis situations. Perhaps if adults are given the opportunity to experience the healing

of memories through sports, this positive psychosocial wellbeing could carry over into the behavior adapted through children.

Conclusion:

Sports can be used to empower refugees physically, emotionally, and socially, equipping them with conflict resolution skills. Physically, refugees are able to enjoy the benefits of fitness activity, which include enhanced self-confidence and improved self-image.¹³ In addition, when partnered in an educational context, sports can serve as a tool for the disbursement of health education. Emotionally, sports allow for the healing of memories, thus alleviating emotional distress incurred throughout a refugee's displacement and a safe place to channel feelings of frustration or aggression. Sports also enable refugees to uncover personal meaning in their life. Socially, sports create opportunities for refugees to both participate in and contribute towards community building. Sports participation also fosters a sense of belonging, which helps to erase the dehumanizing effects of persistent negative characterizations of opposing groups.

Furthermore, sports provide the opportunity to learn cooperation and respect, develop decision-making skills, gain leadership experience, and learn how to handle success and failure.

Finally, sport builds bridges across social, economic, and cultural divides within societies and by building a sense of shared identity and fellowship among groups that might otherwise be inclined to treat each other with distrust, hostility, or violence. Through sports programs, youth are taught how to handle conflict, how to approach both losing and winning with character, and provide an outlet for people of differing religions, ethnicities, countries, or political ideations to come together. Once playing together, often youth uncover the stereotypes about the other culture which fosters a sense of peace, trust, and security of other cultures. Given the plethora of noteworthy programs, sports-related interventions, and the creative ways in which sport is used

for health promotion, the impact of sports in the lives of refugees is both substantial and continually evolving.

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