

ABSTRACT

This article explores the role sports can play in addressing some of the issues faced by refugees. At the outset, the meaning of the term 'refugee' is described, followed by the distinction between a 'refugee' and a 'migrant'. The article then proceeds to discuss the need for integration of refugees into society and how sports can play a role in it. Some sports-based initiatives at the international level have been described followed by a brief discussion of the scenario in India. The article also highlights some hurdles in linking sports and refugees, and assesses whether these can be major deterrents to adopting this route in the long run. Finally, the article sums up the observations on this issue, and provides some recommendations for the future.

Keywords: Sports, refugees, Olympic, UNHCR, integration

SPORTS AND REFUGEES: A PERFECT ‘MATCH’?

Sports and Refugees- A Perfect ‘Match’?

“We do not speak the same language, we are from different countries, but the Olympic flag unites us all together; and now we are representing 60 million [people] around the world. We want to do our best to show everyone that we can do everything we can for being good athletes and good people.”¹

~Yusra Mardini (member of the 2016 Refugee Olympic team)

Introduction

The International Olympic Committee (“**IOC**”) fielded the first-ever refugee Olympic athletes’ team at the Summer Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro in 2016. The team consisted of two Syrian swimmers, two judokas from the Democratic Republic of Congo, a marathon runner from Ethiopia, and five middle-distance runners from South Sudan.² These athletes emerged as some of the stars of the competition, epitomizing resilience and fortitude in the face of unimaginable adversity.

This partnership between sports and refugees goes way back, when the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (“**UNHCR**”) entered into a partnership with the IOC more than two decades ago, through former UN High Commissioner, Sadako Ogata and then-President, Juan Antonio Samaranch.³

This piece revolves around this ‘unusual’ linkage and is an attempt at exploring some of its aspects.

Refugee- Definition

There is sufficient guidance in international law as to the definition and the protection of refugees. Some of the texts pertaining to this are the United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, adopted in 1951 (entered into force on 22 April 1954) (“**the Convention**”), its 1967 Protocol (“**the Protocol**”) as well as other legal documents, like the 1969 OAU Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa, and the Cartagena Declaration on Refugees (a non-binding declaration setting out regional standards for refugees in Central America, Mexico and Panama).⁴ These documents have served as inspiration and guidance for many other frameworks for the support of refugees at the international, regional and national level.

The Convention is born out of Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, 1948 (“**UDHR**”), which recognizes the right of persons to seek asylum⁵ from persecution in other

¹ International Olympic Committee. Retrieved from <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/international-olympic-committee.html>.

² International Olympic Committee United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Retrieved from <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/international-olympic-committee.html>.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ UNHCR viewpoint: ‘Refugee’ or ‘migrant’- which is right?. (2016, July 11). Retrieved from <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/latest/2016/7/55df0e556/unhcr-viewpoint-refugee-migrant-right.html>.

⁵ A refugee is first an asylum-seeker, which is to say, that an asylum-seeker is an individual who has sought international protection and whose claim for refugee status is yet to be determined. As part of internationally

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countries. Since the 1951 Convention was made in the aftermath of World War II, it was originally limited in scope to persons fleeing events occurring before 1 January 1951 and within Europe. The Convention has since been amended once, through the Protocol, which removed the temporal and geographic limits of the Convention. The emphasis of the definition of a “refugee” under the Convention is “on the protection of persons from political or other forms of persecution. A refugee, according to the Convention, is someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.”⁶

Distinction between ‘refugee’ and ‘migrant’

At this point, distinction must be drawn between ‘refugees’ and ‘migrants’, for people often use the two interchangeably, even though they vary greatly in their meaning. The former are people who are driven to another country by so-called ‘push’ factors, such as fear of persecution, war, and violence while the latter are people who move to another country, attracted by so-called ‘pull’ factors, such as better career prospects, unification with family, or a better standard of living. Simply put, while refugees have no choice when fleeing their country, migrants usually have the option to return to their country if the circumstances so warrant, and they will still be entitled to protection from their home country, unlike refugees.

Need for integration

The above distinction inevitably means that for a refugee, the very definition of ‘home’ changes from its traditional connotation. The principle of *non-refoulement* under the Convention seeks to ensure that no refugee can be expelled or returned to any territory where he fears for his life or freedom “on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.”⁷

He no longer has the choice to return home and thus, ‘home’ for him is wherever he seeks asylum. However, in order for anyone to be able to identify a place as their ‘home’, they need to integrate with the people, place and culture. Unlike a migrant who moves from one place to another, usually with all requisite amenities, a refugee may not even get a chance to gather basic belongings before fleeing his country. Shorn of all his roots, it is difficult for a refugee to adjust in any new setting.

Role of sport

Sport, as we all know, simultaneously strokes the embers of competitiveness and unity among people. It is one of those strange phenomenon wherein people come together whilst supporting different teams or players. Everyone who is part of a game, irrespective of their position in the bigger picture- a player, a referee/umpire, a spectator, a cameraman or a zealot perched on a tree

recognized obligations to protect refugees on their territories, countries are responsible for determining whether an asylum-seeker is a refugee or not (UNHCR Asylum Trends 2014: Levels and Trends in Industrialized Countries, <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/statistics/unhcrstats/551128679/asylum-levels-trends-industrialized-countries-2014.html>).

⁶ Convention and Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees. Retrieved from <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/3b66c2aa10>.

⁷ Article 33 of the Convention.

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on the lookout for a ball to come swooshing from the ground- are one in that moment, engulfed with similar emotions. Perhaps it is this virtue of sport that makes it a social adhesive of sorts.

According to research done by the North Carolina State University, focusing specifically on the role of professional football in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, organized sports can be a powerful tool for helping to rebuild communities in the aftermath of disasters, provided that this is done without “glossing” over serious issues that need to be addressed.⁸



Sports-based initiatives to help refugees

This healing potential of sport can be harnessed with respect to refugees as well. In fact, it has begun to be used by several organizations and the efforts are already bearing fruit.

International Level

The UNHCR has recognized the positive influence of sport in the lives of refugees, particularly children, and it works actively with corporates and other foundations to integrate sport into the refugee welfare programme. The following are some sports partnerships the UNHCR has⁹:

- FC Barcelona
- Federation Internationale de Volleyball
- International Olympic Committee

⁸ Bigger than football: Study shows sports can help communities recover from disaster. (2011, July 6). Retrieved from <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2011/07/110706104757.htm>.

⁹ Teaming up to give refugees a sporting chance. Retrieved from <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/sport-partnerships.html>.

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- Nike Foundation
- Nike Inc.
- Right to Play (Toronto-based international humanitarian organization dedicated to using sport and play to foster healthy and all-round development of children in refugee camps worldwide).

Apart from this, the UNHCR has another ongoing internet-based sports and education campaign- “ninemillion.org”. This campaign was launched in 2006 as part of the World Refugee Day celebrations by the UNHCR with the support of founding campaign partners Nike, Inc. and Microsoft, both founding members of UNHCR’s Council of Business Leaders and Right To Play.¹⁰ Two-thirds of the money raised through this initiative will be used for education projects in refugee camps, while the remaining one-third will fund sport and play programmes by Right To Play for refugee youth, with a focus on getting girls and young women onto playing fields, since they are even more marginalized among the refugee population.

National Level

Apart from initiatives at the international level, there are many ongoing efforts at national level. In the US, L.A.C.E.S. (Life And Change Experienced thru Sports) has been using sport to transform the lives of former child soldiers, street children and orphans, and in July, 2016, it launched its first refugee youth soccer camp for refugees in the Washington D.C. metro area. In November, 2016, L.A.C.E.S. formed a team of 12 refugees and played its first soccer league, and in January, 2017, a second team of 11 children was established.¹¹ The league participants come from five different countries and many have been in the US for less than four months. These leagues provide an opportunity for the children to develop their soccer skills, practise the English language and interact with their peers, and acquire other valuable virtues like teamwork and amicable dispute resolution.

In another part of the world, the Hamburger Sportbund (or the Hamburg Sports Association) runs a project- “Welcome to Sport - Sport and Movement Opportunities for Refugees”¹² through which it supports sports clubs in the organization and implementation of sports facilities for refugees.

Another scheme with an interesting premise is Germany’s Federal Volunteers Service (*Bundesfreiwilligendienst*), a nation-wide government-run programme wherein adults can volunteer to give back to the community by partaking in various activities for one year. Earlier, the programme mostly involved pensioners, students and people who were taking a break from their regular jobs. Since December, 2015, this programme was thrown open for refugees and asylum-seekers as well. This fulfilled a two-pronged strategy: giving these volunteers an

¹⁰ Press release: For nine million refugee youth, a chance to learn and play. (2006, June 20). Retrieved from <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/partners/partners/44be02d52/press-release-nine-million-refugee-youth-chance-learn-play.html>.

¹¹ Refugee Program. Retrieved from <http://www.laces.org/impact/our-projects/united-states/>.

¹² Willkommen im Sport- Sport mit Geflüchteten. Retrieved from <https://www.hamburger-sportbund.de/projekte/willkommen-im-sport-sport-mit-gefluechteten>.

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opportunity to contribute and gain practical experience and simultaneously, handling the massive influx of refugees efficiently by involving resources from within the community. This strategy works as these volunteers can translate and interact with the refugees in their native language and the refugees, in turn, feel more comfortable adjusting into a new environment. Here also, sports has been utilized. For example, a refugee volunteer visits children in shelters in Berlin and takes them to play basketball, pool, table tennis etc.¹³

Another way to integrate the cause of refugees with sports is to raise money and resources for the cause by organizing charity matches and marathons. For example, the Vluchtelingenwerk Vlaanderen is an organization that has come up with the concept of Refugee Runners, who will run a 20K marathon in Brussels, to raise money for refugees and asylum-seekers.¹⁴

Scenario in India

While this may not have received its fair share of attention, India has some sports initiatives for refugees as well.

➤ *Rohingya FC and Rohingya FC of India*¹⁵

The chasm between Rohingya Muslims and Rakhine Buddhists in Myanmar widened to great proportions in 2012, and several thousands of Rohingyas fled the violence and oppression, and came to India. In 2016, one of the refugees, Abdulla, started a football club- Rohingya FC on the outskirts of Hyderabad. The team is diverse with players as young as 11 years old to players aged 35 years, all united by their passion for the game.

While the Rohingyas are not *prima facie* distinguishable from the rest of the local populace, once they receive Long Term Visas, labelling them as refugees from Myanmar, the attitude of the locals towards them often grows cold. One of the main reasons is that many voluntary organizations come to the aid of the refugees, ensuring that they get amenities like electricity and water connections, facilities that the locals themselves are often deprived of.

It was in football that Shabeer, the President of the Rohingya Human Rights Initiative, found a ray of hope to convert hostility into competitive camaraderie. He approached LehLeh Sports, a company that organizes corporate sports events for Google, Accenture and the like, to hold a friendly tournament for the Rohingyas. For the first time, in April 2017, the company invited the Rohingyas to a tournament. The team- Rohingya FC of India- comprised Rohingya refugees from different states of India, and secured the

¹³ Le Blond, Josie and Welters, Gordon (2016, October 5). Refugees and asylum-seekers sign up to offer warm welcome in Germany. Retrieved from <http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/stories/2016/10/57e92aa24/refugees-asylum-seekers-sign-offer-warm-welcome-germany.html>.

¹⁴ Join the Refugee Runners of Vluchtelingenwerk. Retrieved from <http://www.vluchtelingenwerk.be/join-the-refugee-runners-of-vluchtelingenwerk#sub-160>.

¹⁵ Jose, Donita. (2017, April 24). A field of their own: How football is helping Rohingya refugees find their place in India. Retrieved from <http://www.thestateless.com/2017/04/24/a-field-of-their-own-how-football-is-helping-rohingya-refugees-find-their-place-in-india/>.

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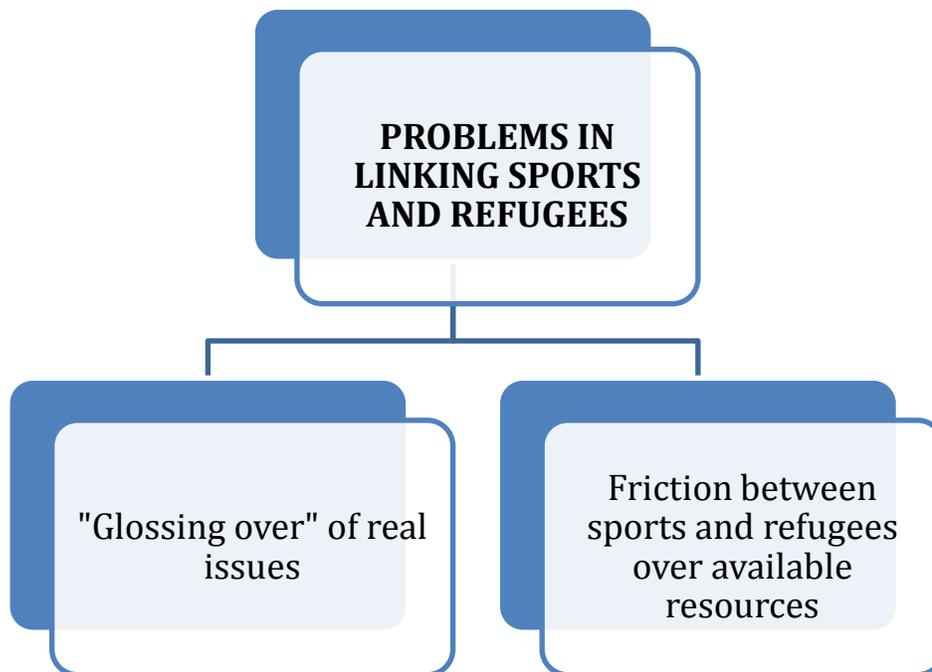
second place in the tournament, after reaching the finals. The team was subsequently invited for another tournament by LehLeh Sports.

➤ *Tibet Women’s Soccer*

Tibet Women’s Soccer is an independent association that supports female Tibetan refugees in their growth and development through their involvement with soccer. The organization also helps create grassroots-level soccer teams in Tibetan settlements in India and Nepal. Its headquarters are in Clementown Tibetan Settlement in Dehradun. Cassie Childers, the founder of this initiative, started it with the belief that “organized sports are a way for female Tibetans to enrich their lives through playful interaction with each other and by generating a new, positive presence in their community.”¹⁶ So far, the programme has roped in more than 3,000 Tibetan women living in exile and has enhanced their lives through a comprehensive training and leadership programme.

Problems facing the interlinkage of sports and refugees

It is not all that simple, however, as far as the relation between sports and the refugee cause is concerned.



“Glossing over” of real issues

¹⁶ Tibet Women’s Soccer (About Us). Retrieved from <http://www.tibetwomenssoccer.org/about-us>.

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Some researchers find that by focusing on resolution of such serious problems through sports and the like, the true nature of the problem is overlooked and in fact, may be suppressed. This would lead to a false sense of security and belief that the issue has been resolved when the actual concerns will have been left unaddressed. Thus, using sport in such cases will only result in a media circus or a publicity gimmick, with refugees being left none the better after the “drill” is over.

Dr. Kenneth Zagacki, co-author of a paper on rehabilitation efforts post-Katrina, notes, “(But) we have to be careful that we don’t use sports to gloss over real problems. We don’t want to ‘move on’ from tragedies like Katrina when real social problems remain.”¹⁷

This aspect of sports being misused to detract from real issues is not a mere apprehension but unfortunately, something that has been attempted by many governments and countries in the past. India and Pakistan share a bilateral cricket relationship with tremendous potential, given their history of being arch-rivals and the immense talent on both teams. But somehow their volatile ties have not been improved despite the ‘sporting’ efforts. In fact, bilateral cricket relations have become a casualty of the political ‘games’ and are currently on hold.

Another instance was that of football club FC Barcelona playing matches against a team comprising players from both Israel and Palestine for peace and hosting soccer camps for children from both sides. There were voices of dissent against this fearing that these would serve as mere “PR” opportunities while human rights violations would continue and no concrete efforts to bridge gaps would be taken. In fact, such a “peace match” proposed in 2013 was criticized considering that two of Palestine’s national players were in Israeli jails without trial, and this match sought that Palestinian players play alongside Israeli players.¹⁸

Friction between sports and refugees over available resources

Apart from the above-mentioned problem, there is the technical issue of an overlap between sports and refugees for resources. While the impact of sport in helping refugees is being lauded, ironically, many sports clubs, gymnasiums and local recreation centres are having to give up their spaces, in order to convert them into refugee shelters/camps.¹⁹ This may be cause for worry. Local authorities in Germany, for example, where the refugee influx has been sizeable, “are only too aware of the danger of the refugee project backfiring badly if local communities feel they are being deprived of their sports halls or youth clubs for too long.”²⁰

¹⁷ Bigger than football: Study shows sports can help communities recover from disaster. (2011, July 6). Retrieved from <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2011/07/110706104757.htm>.

¹⁸ Sport should not be used to gloss over political failures in Israeli-Palestine conflict. (2013, February 23). Retrieved from <https://www.sportskeeda.com/football/sport-should-not-be-used-to-gloss-over-political-failures-in-israeli-palestine-conflict>.

¹⁹ Wittrock, Philipp. (2016, September 2). Taking Stock One Year After Refugees’ Arrival. Retrieved from <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/taking-stock-one-year-after-the-arrival-of-refugees-in-germany-a-1110654.html>.

²⁰ Connolly, Kate. (2015, October 8). Refugee crisis: Germany creaks under strain of open-door policy. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/oct/08/refugee-crisis-germany-creaks-under-strain-of-open-door-policy>.

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An article²¹ about the German city of Cologne, exploring the above-mentioned issue, helps put things into perspective. MTV Cologne, the city’s biggest amateur sports club, had several members who used to benefit from affordable participation sports offered at a nearby multi-purpose facility. However, ever since the city administration took up the gymnasium to house refugees, the activities of members have taken a hit. The club also had to move around 170 to 180 practices or games per month to other facilities- another mammoth task. As a result of this upheaval, in the last quarter of 2015, a record number of the club’s members quit.

This is not an issue of sports clubs being inhospitable towards refugees, but rather an issue of technicality and resources. Some of the sports that are offered in these gymnasiums cannot be played in smaller spaces or in just any other place available. Also, the smaller spaces available as alternatives cannot resolve the issue of storage of equipment effectively.

According to the German Olympic Sports Confederation’s (“**DOSB**”) estimates, across Germany, around 1,000 gymnasiums are currently being used as shelters for refugees. DOSB President Alfons Hörmann has warned, “When people can no longer exercise in the usual way, there will come a point at which the mood in the clubs and the municipalities will change.”

The state of North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany’s biggest, hosting 19,000 sports clubs²² has reportedly suffered the most. Unofficial figures indicate that by the start of November, 2015, 400 sports facilities in the state were being used to house refugees. However, spokesman for the Sports Association of North Rhine-Westphalia (“**LSB**”) has said that no current official figures are available, and that while some clubs have stated that the current situation has led to a loss of some of their members, no club has had to suspend its operations. LSB has supported the cause of refugees by providing funding for special programmes, including a total of €250,000 (\$275,000) to 500 clubs that offer sports for recent refugees, reflecting that sports clubs endeavour to fulfill the role they play in society as a whole.

However, sports clubs need access to their facilities in order for these programmes to bear fruit, and keeping these facilities as refugee shelters may be acceptable as a “stop-gap” solution but not as a permanent remedy. Holger Dahlke, managing director of MTV Cologne, has also asserted that when the sports facilities are not available for their intended purpose, it also adversely affects the sports programmes that can be offered to refugees. To add to their woes, the number of members quitting also leads to a reduction in revenue. This magnifies the burden on the clubs and gymnasiums, who incur high volumes of day-to-day expenditures in the form of personnel costs, travel allowances for volunteer coaches etc.

Another boulder on the road to developing an effective symbiotic relationship between the cause of refugees and sports is that the popularity of sport is often low as compared to education and health, which are given higher priority. In view of this, access to funding can be tricky.

²¹ Gerstenberger, Olivia. (2016, February 23). How the refugee crisis has taken its toll on German sports clubs. Retrieved from <http://www.dw.com/en/how-the-refugee-crisis-has-taken-its-toll-on-german-sports-clubs/a-19067904>.

²² Jaekel, Tim. (WP BRP 04/PSP/2017). Modern Sports-for-All Policy: An International Comparison of Policy Goals and Models of Service Delivery, National Research University Higher School of Economics. Retrieved from <https://wp.hse.ru/data/2017/03/06/1166665949/04PSP2017.pdf>.

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Future Course of Action

The aforementioned points cannot be said to be negative aspects in the strict sense of the term but merely reflect a short-term casualty of circumstances. After all, this allotment of spaces is only a temporary arrangement, and if refugees are enabled and integrated into society through means such as sports, they will have a better chance of moving out of such makeshift setups.

The above discussion clearly reflects that sports are a storehouse of potential as far as addressing crises is concerned. They are of greater utility considering the plethora of concerns they can simultaneously address, namely:

- Social issues of integration and adjustment;
- Physical issues of health and well-being;
- Psychological and mental issues of stress, isolation and/or alienation;
- Lost opportunity of education;
- Adjustment issues with the language;
- A wide age-group covered: ranging from children to adults.

When one plays a sport, one is in the moment and everyone, even remotely interested in it, is striving towards the same end- to watch a good match. There is no denying that it may only be a temporary respite from the more pressing issues refugees face, but it can be a pathway towards resolution of a lot of their concerns, giving them hope and a chance at a new and fulfilling life.

It is with this in mind that more such endeavours should be encouraged, not just in places where the crisis is of significant proportion but also at the local level, through volunteerism and participation, for it is at this microcosmic level that truly lasting ties can be built and maintained.