Sport: Tool for Development

After the international spotlight on South Africa's football stadiums fades to black, questions about the legacy and social impact of such sporting events remain. For one, how can sport contribute to youth empowerment and social transformation at the grassroots level?

By Daniela Preti for ISN Insights

'Sport and Development' refers to the use of sport as a tool for development, where sport is not considered an end in itself but rather a means to create social change. From a development perspective, sport is used to reach out to as many individuals as possible - emphasizing participation and inclusion rather than competition and selection. Furthermore, sport is generally understood in its broadest sense, including all sorts of physical activities that contribute to physical fitness, mental well-being and social interaction, such as play, recreation, organized sport and indigenous games and dances. The Sport and Development approach aims at contributing to sustainable human development, a concept that moves beyond the classic development paradigm of economic growth and rather puts people - as the principal actors and intended beneficiaries of development - at the center.

The right of access to and participation in sport and play has long been recognized in a number of international conventions. In 1978, UNESCO described sport and physical education as a "fundamental right for all." Similarly, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (adopted in 1989) recognized "the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts." This allows for sport, recreation and play to be considered not only as a necessary component of child and youth development (a 'needs'-based perspective) but also one in which these activities are considered entitlements (a 'rights'-based perspective).

Despite international recognition of the importance of physical activity and play as part of a holistic education, sport was historically underestimated as a major tool of humanitarian and development programs and was rarely used in a systematic way. More recently, however, interest has increased – with development organizations incorporating sport more frequently into their programmatic repertoire.

Why sport?

Sport is touted as a development tool for several reasons. A key premise is that sport can help build core social competencies and life skills on an individual level, while fostering social cohesion and social capital on a community level. Furthermore, given the strong appeal sport has on children and
youth, it can easily be used as a hook to recruit adolescents to health and education programs.

On an individual level, sport is a vital component of holistic child and youth development. First, the obvious health benefits exist (physical level). Additionally, studies indicate that sport can increase children and young people's psychosocial well-being, resilience and self-esteem (intra-personal level). Through participation in sport, young people can improve their social, emotional and cognitive skills and learn about the importance of honesty, teamwork, fair play and respect for themselves and others (inter-personal level). It also provides a forum for young people to learn how to deal with competition and cope with winning and losing, which contributes to their social and moral development in addition to their physical and cognitive skills and abilities.

On a community level, the role of sport has been shown to strongly link to building social cohesion and social capital among youth. Sport is often used as a practical tool to engage young people in their communities through volunteering, resulting in higher levels of leadership and community engagement. Sport training can help young people become more responsible community members and increase their leadership qualities.

Last but not least, sport is a very powerful tool for social mobilization. In disadvantaged communities, where the range of leisure activities is often very limited or even nonexistent, sport has a unique potential to attract, mobilize and inspire children and youth. Especially in the developing world, the importance of providing meaningful leisure activities in both rural and urban settings cannot be underestimated. Sport can help keep children and youth off the streets and away from risky behaviors by offering a safe and supportive environment. Theoretical models derived from social learning theory indicate the important function sport coaches can play as role models and mentors. For children and adolescents, it is usually easier to build trust with coaches than teachers or other authority figures. Local sport coaches are removed from the home and school settings and are often familiar with the challenges the children face in their day-to-day lives from their own experience. They thus have a high level of credibility when passing on key life skills or health messages and can function as positive role models in their communities.

**Challenges and limitations**

Despite the potential of sport as a tool for development, problematic elements should not be overlooked. Sport, being to a certain extent a reflection of society, can encompass some very worrying human traits such as violence, corruption, discrimination, racism, homophobia, sexism, hooliganism, excessive nationalism, cheating and drug abuse. As such, it has historically been a predominantly male domain.

For the Sport and Development approach to reach its objectives, these concerns need to be given careful consideration. Sport and Development programs need to be well embedded in other development initiatives, and collaboration with experts in areas such as gender, health or education needs to be assured. Furthermore, successful Sport and Development programs must ensure the right of all members of society to participate in sport and leisure activities. Effective programs deliberately give priority to development objectives and are carefully designed to be inclusive.

Sport and Development is still a young and emerging field, leaving room for innovative and cutting-edge projects to surface. While anecdotal evidence and positive examples from the field are on the rise, additional long-term empirical study is needed. A strong focus needs to be put on monitoring and evaluation in order to make scientifically sound contributions in this new and innovative field of international cooperation and to further elaborate on good practices and lessons learned.
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