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The role of sport in achieving the sustainable development goals

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Abstract

Sport is also an important enabler of sustainable development. We recognize the growing contribution of sport to the realization of development and peace in its promotion of tolerance and respect and the contributions it makes to the empowerment of women and of young people, individuals and communities as well as to health, education and social inclusion objectives. With the overarching aspiration of bringing people and the planet closer together and leaving no one behind, the 2030 Agenda is a unique opportunity to inspire global action for development worldwide, including in the field of Sport for Development and peace.

Keywords: Sustainable development, social inclusion

Introduction

After 21 years of progress towards the unprecedented Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the world has turned its attention to the successor Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in a period of transition to the newly adopted 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In reviewing achievements and pending business surrounding the eight MDGs, the international community, led by the United Nations, undertook a thorough consultation process with stakeholders from all spheres of society and agreed on 17 SDGs to be pursued over the next 15 years. With the overarching aspiration of bringing people and the planet closer together and leaving no one behind, the 2030 Agenda is a unique opportunity to inspire global action for development worldwide, including in the field of Sport for Development and Peace.

Sport has proven to be a cost-effective and flexible tool for promoting peace and development objectives. Since the inception of the MDGs in 2000, sport has played a vital role in enhancing each of the eight Goals, a fact that has been recognized in numerous resolutions of the General Assembly. In resolution 70/1, entitled “Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”, adopted in 2015, sport’s role in advancing social progress is further acknowledged:

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Harnessing this tremendous potential of sport, the United Nations Office on Sport for Development and Peace (UNOSDP) has long been bringing people together through sport and supporting sport for peace initiatives, from mega sport events to grass-roots activities. These initiatives help sport achieve its fullest potential in realizing the Goals.

Regular participation in sport and physical activities provides various social and health benefits. Not only does it have a direct impact on physical fitness, but it also instils healthy lifestyle choices among children and young people, helping them remain active and combat non-communicable diseases. A number of studies conducted by the World Health Organization have also highlighted that physical exercise can stimulate positive mental health and cognitive development. Exercise has been linked to improvements in self-esteem and self-confidence, as well as positive effects for people struggling with depression and anxiety.

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Sport contributes to well-being regardless of age, gender or ethnicity. It is enjoyed by all, and its reach is unrivalled. For instance, the World Taekwondo Federation established the Taekwondo Humanitarian Foundation to promote the martial art in refugee camps around the world. Such initiatives raise awareness about the plight of young refugees and are fully in harmony with the SDGs, particularly with regard to health (Goal 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages).

Children and young people benefit tremendously from physical activity. Combined with a school curriculum, physical activities and sport are necessary for a comprehensive education (Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning). Sport provides lifelong learning and alternative education for children who cannot attend school. By taking part in sport and physical activities alongside school, students are exposed to sport's key values, including teamwork, fair play, respect of the rules and others, cooperation, discipline and tolerance. These skills are essential for future participation in group activities and professional life, and can stimulate social cohesion within communities and societies. Given the personal and social development benefits sport offers, increasing access and participation is a primary development goal.

For this reason, UNOSDP has been running its Youth Leadership Programme (YLP) since 2012 with the aim of training and empowering young leaders from disadvantaged communities to use sport as a tool for progress. At the YLP camp held in Hamburg, Germany, in February 2016, six refugees were welcomed and integrated into the group, highlighting sport's capacity to foster inclusion and bring people together.

Furthermore, sport in its most basic form encourages balanced participation and has the capacity to promote gender equality (Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls). Through sport and physical activity, women and girls can be empowered and benefit from the positive impact that sport has on health and psychosocial conditions.

Female participation in sport also challenges stereotypes and social roles commonly associated with women. Sport can help women and girls demonstrate their talents and achievements to society by emphasizing their skills and abilities. This, in turn, improves self-esteem and self-confidence in women participants. Sport also offers opportunities for social interaction and friendship, which can raise awareness of gender roles among male counterparts and convey social and psychological benefits to both individuals and groups.

For example, the Diyar Consortium project implemented in the State of Palestine effectively illustrates sport's ability to promote gender equality. The project established a sports centre to provide an opportunity for women to participate in sport, learn transferable skills and gain knowledge for employment. The Diyar Women Sports Unit was founded in 2008, and a great example of its success was represented by the Diyar Women Soccer Team, which became one of the top national soccer (football) teams in the State of Palestine. In 2011, the team won the first-ever Palestinian Women Football League Championship. Members of the Diyar Women Soccer Team are now involved in the academy, opened in 2012, training and passing on their knowledge to younger girls. Furthermore, Diyar has developed a strong network and partnerships with Palestinian and international organizations, allowing the project to gain momentum and support to

become sustainable. This project benefited not only women but the community as a whole.

Through the initiatives of UNOSDP and its partners, sport contributes to making cities and communities more inclusive (Goal 11: Make cities inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable). In April 2016, I travelled to Nepal to attend the inauguration of the Table Tennis for NepALL project, which aims to promote the inclusion of people with disabilities. It is a great example of how sport can foster social development by changing perceptions about people with disabilities and providing such people with an opportunity to participate in sport despite significant barriers. In particular, after the devastating 2015 earthquake in Nepal, sport created a sense of normalcy and self-efficacy for the survivors.

Additionally, sport can be used as a meaningful tool for the prevention of conflict and the promotion of long-lasting peace, since sport and its universality has the ability to transcend cultures (Goal 16: Promote just, peaceful and inclusive societies).

In its contribution towards peace, sport often provides safe environments at the grassroots and community levels, at which participants are brought together in the pursuit of common goals and interests; learn values of respect, tolerance and fair play; and develop social competencies. As a common denominator and shared passion, sport can build bridges between communities regardless of their cultural differences or political divisions. In times of conflict or instability, sporting activities can provide participants with a sense of normalcy.

I witnessed how sport can be used to promote mutual understanding and dialogue in conflict areas during the YLP held in Gwangju, Republic of Korea, in 2013. The programme brought together participants from both the Republic of Korea and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea, providing them and others with an opportunity to realize that they share more similarities than differences, and helping them dispel negative perceptions of one another. YLP was an essential tool for the two countries to use sport to generate social ties that help foster rapprochement, respect, mutual understanding and dialogue.

Fundamental to the true enhancement of global development and the realization of the SDGs is the establishment of strong and cohesive partnerships. The world is more interconnected than ever and the global phenomenon of sport has the power to connect influential networks of diverse partners and stakeholders with a shared commitment to lasting development. In this regard, the world of sport can provide powerful partner and stakeholder networks committed to the use of sport for sustainable development (Goal 17: Revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development).

An outstanding example of such partnership in this context is the cooperation between the United Nations and the International Olympic Committee (IOC), an entity holding observer status in the United Nations General Assembly and serving as a key UNOSDP partner with several joint initiatives in Sport for Development and Peace. For instance, the General Assembly has adopted several resolutions on the Olympic Truce. Every four years, the United Nations urges Member States, all conflicting parties and other stakeholders to respect the Truce during the celebration of the Olympic and Paralympic Games, with the hope that one day of truce can lead to a week of peace, a month of peace, and eventually put an end to war. Olympic values have thus become an important component of sport and education with a long tradition in promoting peace. General Assembly resolution 70/4, entitled

“Building a peaceful and better world through sport and the Olympic ideal”, was co-sponsored by 180 United Nations Member States and adopted by consensus in 2015. In the resolution, States agreed to observe the Olympic Truce from seven days before the opening ceremony of the Rio 2016 Olympic Games in August until seven days after the closing ceremony of the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games in September.

These Games will be hugely powerful in inspiring and uniting people across the globe. Brazil will host the first-ever Olympic and Paralympic Games in South America. Also for the first time, refugees will be represented by their own Olympic team. These two unprecedented features of the 2016 Olympic and Paralympic Games show that the events are not fierce competitions but unique opportunities to build a more inclusive society and send a message of peace, inclusion and respect. Mega sport events can help advance social development, economic growth, health, education and environmental protection, especially if they are part of coherent and sustainable, long-term policies at the municipal, regional and national levels.

Conclusion

Sport, however, still faces many challenges to the fulfilment of its true potential. Too often we have seen examples of intolerance, racism, hatred and violence during sporting events. Sport organizations, managers, players and fans must do all they can to combat these ills and fully harness the positive power of sport. Like many other areas, corruption also affects sport. Corruption kills sport, and no tolerance should be afforded to malpractice in sport, including doping. Our role is to keep fighting abuses and promoting the adoption of good governance, integrity and transparency. We must also seek to place the SDGs at the core of all sporting organizations.

Despite these challenges, the vast positive power and passion of sport will continue to bring people together, promoting a more inclusive and peaceful world through its universal values and principles. Historically, sport has played an important role in all societies and acted as a strong communication platform that can be used to promote a culture of peace. It is, and will continue to be, one of the most cost-effective and versatile tools to promote United Nations values and achieve the SDGs.

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