SPORT AS MEDIUM FOR PROMOTING PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE IN KENYA

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Abstract: *Sport is a powerful tool of cross-cultural communication. Unfortunately people's lack of understanding of other's cultural attitudes and values contributes to political, social, economic, ideological and even physical forms of conflict. Given the ethnic and cultural diversity in Kenya, major conflicts in form of tribal clashes" are common especially in the Rift Valley and other regions where the inhabitants come from different ethnic groupings. Added to the perpetual conflict is the high level of unemployment and lack of opportunities for youth to meaningfully engage themselves. One medium that meaningfully transcends inter-community conflict is sport when widely practiced at both the recreational and competitive level. Indeed sport is a play form of 'conflict' and the only one of its kind that is rooted in agreement. Recent studies on play indicate that play functions as the major means by which children (1) develop intrinsic interests and competencies; (2) learn how to make decisions, solve problems, exert self-control, and follow rules; (3) learn to regulate their emotions; (4) make friends and learn to get along with others as equals; and (5) experience joy. Through all of these effects, play promotes mental health, which is at the root of many societal conflicts and violent behavior. This paper therefore addresses the right for children to play for purposes of fostering health at the individual, society as well as inter-community relationship levels. Sport is a valuable tool for developing the physical, mental, psychological and social dimensions of humans thereby enhancing a more peaceful society.*

KEY WORDS: Sport, cross-cultural communication, play, recreation, social capital

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Introduction

Although scholars offer a variety of definitions of sport, it basically refers to recreational or competitive activity that involves some amount of physical strength or skill. It is a physical or psychophysical activity undertaken for exercise, competition and pleasure (Dzathor, 2003; Ramadhani, nd). Sport offers entertainment or excitement and may be undertaken just for the pleasure of it or on a competitive basis. Peace, on the hand, is a state of harmonious coexistence in a community or between communities or nations, devoid of violence and war. As a society, human beings have an inherent potential for conflict. Indeed, in a natural state, there is always an underlying latent for conflict as a result of differing interests, competition for scarce resources and the need to survive. Indeed it is certain that potential for conflict will always exist among humans. The latency for violence and war among people or between peoples necessitates putting measures in place to facilitate smooth co-existence and processes for managing conflict when it arises (Dzathor, 2003). According to Dzathor (2003) what ensures peace is therefore not the absence of tension, but the presence of justice, good governance and equitable conflict resolution mechanisms in our societies, that ensures that, individuals and groups or nations do not adopt the jungle law approach to resolving differences and conflict.

Sport

Play is a key precursor and foundation for participating in recreational and competitive sport. Even in the animal kingdom, many animals naturally engage in play when not busy hunting for food. Indeed the early occupation of man was the genesis of all modern sports as life revolved around hunting animals and gathering wild fruits, roots and herbs. These actions involved application of motor and psychomotor skills such as running, jumping, throwing, bending, lifting, digging, pulling and coordinating physical and mental functions (Dzathor, 2003). These actions appear to be the basis of most, if not all contemporary sports. At the cultural and functional level sport works primarily by bridging relationships across social, economic and cultural divides within society, 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 (Dzathor, 2003; McGurl, 2011; UN 2005; UN Inter-Agency Task Force, 2003). Use of sport is vital in relationship building, which is a central component of peace building and highlights the importance of interventions that explicitly focuses on strategic networking to build relationships.

According to UN (2005), peace building establishes a web of relationships that can sustain local damage without loss of the whole. This means that relationships are not all linked to, or dependent on, a single individual or small number of individuals. This includes horizontal connections at the community level across groups and institutions, as well as vertical links to influential leaders and decision-makers outside the community. NGOs with a sports-related bias are well positioned to facilitate the process of relationship building by bringing people together and engaging them in dialogue and programs that bridge diverse boundaries. In this framework, sport programs, when properly supported, can play a contributing role in this process, creating more opportunities for social contact. Establishing community sport organizations and the participation of community sport volunteers generates social ties and community infrastructure that help to build peace and stability (McGurl, 2011; UN, 2005; UN Inter-Agency Task Force, 2003).

Individual and community connection

It is important that community sport programs are established to provide shared experiences between people that would otherwise view themselves as different and therefore easy to escalate any differences. Community sport programs have the power to connect or "re-humanize" opposing groups in the eyes of their enemies (UN 2005; UN Inter-Agency Task Force, 2003). My experience living on the border of three totally different ethnic

groups and cultures convinces me that sharing sport experiences, has the potential to reveal the common valued ties through participation. Participating in common sporting activities at the community level helps conflicting groups to form and develop ties that reveal their common humanity (McGurl, 2011). According to the UN (2005), this shared "ritual identity," or sense of belonging to the same group on the basis of a shared ritual experience, helps to erase the dehumanizing effects of persistent negative characterizations of opposing groups. This is because sport can serve as a tool for social and traditional cohesion (Beneforti and Cunningham, 2002; McGurl, 2011; Ramadhani, n.d.). It can also advance demobilization and disarmament efforts and support the reintegration of ex-combatants into their communities. Regular sport activities can also help to address war-related trauma and promote healing by providing safe spaces for activities that enable victims of war to regain a sense of security and normalcy. Within safe spaces, victims are able to build positive relationships and, in the case of those who end up with some new disabilities, to rebuild a sense of confidence in their own abilities (UN 2005). Additionally, communities engaging in common sporting rituals creates bonds that weigh against the temptation to attack a home of a teammate!

Sport, through its nearly universal reach and popularity, also offers an important means of reaching out to and engaging socially excluded groups in a community (Amara et.al, 2005; McGurl, 2011; UN 2005; UN Inter-Agency Task Force, 2003). Indeed sport programs are often an initial medium that opens up access to opportunities and services previously deemed to be out of reach to them. Additionally sporting involvement for persons with disabilities also serves to draw them into the community, as they feel appreciated. They also learn valuable life, physical and motor skills that elevate their self-esteem as well as their capacity to engage with others.

Sport as a medium for communication

Sport is also a powerful marketing tool for the various 'player brands' and other societal values. Celebrity athletes, in particular, can be extremely influential as role models and spokespeople for peace and serve, at times, as intermediaries between hostile nations or communities, creating openings for dialogue (UN 2005) for example, Didier Drogba in Cote D'Ivoire and George Weah in Liberia. While these moments generally occur spontaneously at the international level, the same effect can be generated at the local level through carefully designed programs that work in a sustained way to build bridges between antagonistic groups. A good example is Tegla Laroupe, who is noted for using her celebrity status to promote peace among the Pokot, Turkana and Karamajong people and their neighbors (McGurl, 2011). Others like Roger Federer and Margaret Okayo have been UN spokesmen for the 2005 Year of Physical Education and sport (United Nations, 2005). Indeed sport has also been used as a medium to communicate messages on HIV/AIDS awareness and prevention, health, environmental conservation, gender empowerment, education for all, poverty eradication and other social and economic causes. Some of the organizations with global recognition and cited for best practices in harnessing the power of sport include 'Moving the Goalposts

in Kilifi' and 'The Mathare Youth Sports Association' (McGurl, 2011).

Sport as a door for dialogue

Elite sport has been used to open the door to peaceful dialogue and to defuse political tensions between nations. The famous "ping pong diplomacy" between the People's Republic of China and the United States as well as the cricket diplomacy between India and Pakistan are examples of important opportunities for dialogue through sport (UN 2005). According to UN (2005), sport, at the elite or community level, is increasingly being used in a wide variety of ways to promote social inclusion, prevent conflict, and build peace in developed and developing countries. However, these endeavors to promote peace at the elite or community level through sport face limitations. This is because sport is neither essentially good nor bad as it is just a social construct and its role and function depend largely on what we make of it and how it is consumed in society (Sugden, 2006). Furthermore, there is no denying that sport can, and is, being used by some groups and nations to promote conflict. Elite sport has been used to wage tit-for-tat diplomacy (equivalent retaliation) to pressure nations, and even to terrorize — as with the murder of Olympic athletes at the Munich Olympic Games in 1972 (UN 2005). Indeed, sport is also commonly used to promote nationalism and other extreme anti-societal activities such as sport hooliganism, acts of racism and violence against members of minority ethno-cultural groups and other minorities in society.

Limitations to peace building through sport

Despite the many positive outcomes of sport for peace, there is a general understanding that peace building via sport is a fragile and unpredictable process. To be effective, they must be strategic and undertaken in coordination with other key stakeholders in the peace building process — not by sport organizations alone — especially during periods of conflict. With careful design and implementation, sport for peace initiatives can play a valuable role in helping to prevent conflict and build peace around the world — a fundamental pre-condition for all development (UN 2005). Sports, whether individual or team, could be a very powerful tool for promoting peace. Indeed, over 69 percent of developing and 85 percent of developed nations use sport in their national strategies for conflict resolution (UN 2005). This does not mean that there is no sports related violence. Secondary school pupils have been known to fight and continue to fight running battles after soccer matches in many communities. Soccer hooliganism is rife in some European, South American and African countries, sometimes resulting in the death of some fans or peace officers. In spite of such problems, sports related violence is more strongly associated with social groups than with the specific nature of sports. Sports do, and have great potential for bringing people together, fostering unity, understanding, tolerance and love among people, which are essential ingredients in the promotion of peace (Amara et al., 2005; McGurl, 2011; UN 2005).

The fundamental roles of well-designed sport activities include promoting the values of self-discipline, respect for one's opponent, fair play, teamwork, and adherence to mutually agreed
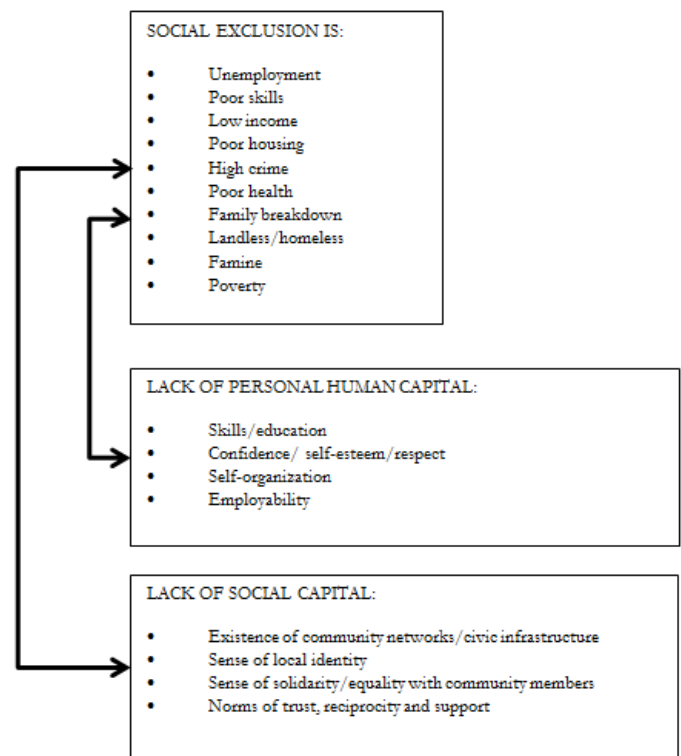
upon rules. Each participant is equipped with values and communication skills necessary to prevent and resolve conflict in their own lives. Sport, play and physical activity can be used to teach life skills including conflict prevention and non-violent conflict resolution to primary and secondary school children, equipping them to make healthy choices later in their lives. According to the UN (2005) report, sport can also be used to reduce tensions and prevent conflict on a broader, community-wide level. Violence has many causes — including lack of opportunity arising from social and economic exclusion. Excluded populations vary greatly, as does the extent of their exclusion. However, excluded populations often include indigenous peoples, members of minority ethno-cultural groups, asylum seekers and refugees, girls and women, persons with disabilities, homeless people, and out-of-school unemployed youth. Indeed all people living in extreme poverty suffer from exclusion (UN 2005; UN Inter-Agency Task Force, 2003). Sport can play an important role in reducing social tensions and conflicts at the community and national level by addressing the sources of this exclusion and providing an alternative entry point into the social and economic life of communities. Many of the factors leading to exclusion at the individual or the societal level, are mutually reinforcing, causing individuals and groups to experience multiple problems. This experience of multiple inter-related difficulties often results from, and contributes to, lack of human capital and social capital as illustrated in table 1. Human capital is the skills, knowledge and personal attributes (e.g., confidence, self-esteem, education, employment skills, etc.) that individuals possess.

Social capital is the social networks, connections and sense of belonging to wider society that enable individuals to access the people, resources and institutional help they need to tackle challenges and realize opportunities in their lives. While lack of human capital and social capital manifest in the lives of individuals, they are often the result of social and economic structures and dynamics that constrain the choices available to individuals and the actions they take. As such, factors leading to social exclusion (such as lack of human and social capital) need to be addressed at the societal, as well as individual level in order to achieve real change. Recreational and competitive sport can be used at both of these levels to improve people's lives. Because of its near universal popularity, sport is a particularly effective tool for connecting with socially excluded groups who are often hard to reach (McGurl, 2011; UN 2005).

At the individual level, recreational sport can aid fitness, foster health, and enhance mental health and well-being by reducing stress, anxiety, and depression (Amara et al., 2005). Recent studies on play indicate that play functions as the major means by which children (1) develop intrinsic interests and competencies; (2) learn how to make decisions, solve problems, exert self-control, and follow rules; (3) learn to regulate their emotions; (4) make friends and learn to get along with others as equals; and (5) experience joy (Gray, 2011). Through all of these effects, play promotes mental health, which is at the root of many societal conflicts and violent behavior (Gray, 2011). There is also evidence that recreational sport participation can enhance self-concept, self-esteem and self-confidence. In social psychological terms, sport is believed to have the potential to

foster individual empathy, tolerance, cooperation, social skills and teamwork. All of these benefits help individuals to increase their store of human capital (Amara et al., 2005; UN 2005).

Table 1. *Dimensions of Social Exclusion*

SOCIAL EXCLUSION IS:

- Unemployment
- Poor skills
- Low income
- Poor housing
- High crime
- Poor health
- Family breakdown
- Landless/homeless
- Famine
- Poverty

LACK OF PERSONAL HUMAN CAPITAL:

- Skills/education
- Confidence/ self-esteem/respect
- Self-organization
- Employability

LACK OF SOCIAL CAPITAL:

- Existence of community networks/civic infrastructure
- Sense of local identity
- Sense of solidarity/equality with community members
- Norms of trust, reciprocity and support

Source: Modified from Amara et al., (2005)

When sport for development and peace initiatives are well-designed, holistic and sustained, they can help marginalized people to acquire the skills and self-confidence needed to both overcome personal barriers and advocate for the elimination of structural barriers to their full participation in community life (Amara et al., 2005; Beneforti and Cunningham, 2002; UN 2005). When integrated properly with other community programs and services, sport initiatives can also connect participants to resources that help them in this process, such as health services, education and employment opportunities, or help with starting a small business thereby generate income and create jobs (McGurl, 2011).

At the societal level, the role of sport in promoting social networks and active citizenship is potentially important. Research suggests that sport has the potential to promote community identity, coherence and integration (Njororai, 2003, 2014), and that people actively involved in sport are more likely to play an active role in the community in other ways. Association football, for example, has been used to enhance the East African solidarity since 1924 (Ibid). Sport can therefore be used as a tool for building community and social capital. Social capital is a key element in local responses to problems of social exclusion and is generally thought to serve three important functions — bonding, bridging, and linking (Amara et al., 2005). Bonding social capital refers to the informal realm, the close ties that help people to get by. These usually involve family, friends

and neighbors. Bridging social capital refers to the civic realm and involves the development of looser ties through networks that extend across different groups in civil society and create bridges between them. Finally, linking social capital refers to the institutional realm, building links to organizations and systems that can help people access resources and bring about broader change (Amara et al., 2005).

Sport and peace in Africa

Over the past few years the United Nations General Assembly has adopted a series of resolutions (2003-2005) on Sport for Development and Peace. The 2006 Resolution 61/10 (United Nations General Assembly, 2006), invited Member States, the United Nations system (including the governing bodies of United Nations agencies), sport-related organizations, the media, civil society and the private sector to collaborate to promote greater awareness and action to foster peace. Building on the spirit of the UN General Assembly resolutions, in 2007 the International Olympic Committee, the Association of National Olympic Committees of Africa, and the African Union issued the Brazzaville Declaration, proposing to join their efforts with those of governments, NGOs and private partners to create a fund for sport for peace initiatives (Brazzaville Declaration, 2007). These international frameworks reflect growing awareness of sport's potential to help prevent conflict and build peace. To be effective, sport for peace initiatives must be carefully designed with specific conflict prevention or peace-building goals in mind. These initiatives should only be undertaken after a rigorous assessment of the context and dynamics involved to minimize the risk that they will inflame the tensions they are intended to address. Widespread programmatic sport for peace initiatives however are relatively new and there is little scientific research that documents their impact. In such cases, programmatic examples provide useful evidence of sport's impact in the area of peace building. In spite of the efforts being made in Africa to establish peace and development through democracy, good governance, regional integration, bilateral and multilateral cooperation and economic structural adjustment, Africa has not been spared its own share of lack of peace and socio-economic retrogression. These have manifested in civil wars, civil strife and violent protests, fueled by ethnic, religious and political differences, poor political leadership and governance, neocolonialism and land tenure systems among other factors (Dzathor, 2003). There are presently only few nations that one would describe as peaceful. The chronic wars between governments and rebel groups in many African countries such as Southern Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo (D.R.C.), Central African Republic and Somalia, just to mention some of them, are vivid in our minds. The 1993 genocide in Rwanda alone claimed an estimated 800,000 victims, and millions have been lost around the African continent due to conflicts.

All these armed conflicts have left a devastating peace and development deficit on the African continent. Some form of epileptic truce and peace has been established in some of these countries and disputed territories, but peace still remains a mirage in some parts of Africa, despite the signing of peace accords between warring factions (Dzathor, 2003). Considering the fact that Africa lags behind the rest of the world in terms of development, peace should be our priority in establishing the enabling environment for accelerated development. Unfortunately, peace it appears, is one of the most lacking conditions on the continent, though probably the most desperately needed to foster development. Even for the most advanced countries, war can reduce all that have been achieved in hundreds of years to rubbles as it happened during the two World Wars and after other major modern wars. The cost of wars and conflicts can be avoided if proactive strategies were used in containing inter-community differences and instead promoting friendships (Dzathor, 2003). Some sports festivals or events do proactively and officially promote the themes of friendship and/or peace as their mission(s). In East Africa, holding of regular competitions across the region involving high schools, universities, clubs and national teams goes a long way in cementing cordial relationships.

Conclusion

Based on the evidence from around the world, time is ripe to develop a coherent and systematic strategy for increasing the use of sport within our communities, institutions, organizations and nations to promote and enhance peaceful co-existence (McGurl, 2011; Ramadhani, n.d., UN, 2005). A common framework needs to be established that draws together sport-related initiatives and actors across the different sectors. Globally, sports have been used and continue to be used to bring individuals and groups from different races, social classes, religious creeds, nationalities and ethnic backgrounds together to interact at tournaments or sports festivals, to get them acquainted with each other in order to promote peace, love and harmony (Beneforti and Cunningham, 2002). Sporting events are a forum where athletes, officials and spectators from different cultural backgrounds come together to interact and learn more about each other's culture and values. Interaction at sporting events creates attitudinal change, which ultimately impinges positively on social behavior. The exposure to other perspectives gained during socialization at such sports festivals or during tournaments make the participants become more understanding, empathetic and tolerant of other people's views and interests. The eventual impact on society is a peaceful co-existence and resolution of their differences in a more amicable way.

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