

Thematic paper: The contribution of sport to the Youth, Peace and Security agenda



2 December 2021 - Koulikoro, Mali – Young woman and men running between Bamako and Koulikoro, Mali, with the peace flame. The Grand Trail de la Jeunesse pour la Paix is a relay race that mobilized more than 1500 young runners from Bamako to Gao, Mali, organized by UNDP and IOM, to promote social cohesion and peacebuilding through sports.

Photo credit: UNDP Mali

The present thematic paper was developed on the initiative of the UN Inter-Agency Group on Sport for Development and Peace (IAGSDP) as a contribution to the development of the second Secretary General's report on Youth, Peace and Security, published on 16 March 2022 (S/2022/220). The paper was collaboratively drafted by youth and sport resource persons in the following UN entities: UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations Development Programme, UN Office for Drugs and Crime, UN High Commissioner for Refugees, UN Office of Counter-Terrorism and the UN Alliance of Civilizations. It showcases examples of specific project, activities and other sport-based initiatives by selected members of the IAGSDP which were implemented within the reporting period (2020-2021) and contribute to Youth, Peace and Security Agenda.

1. Introduction

The 2030 Agenda, adopted in 2015 by the United Nations, recalls that “**sport is an important enabler of sustainable development**” and values “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.”

Beyond the fact that **sport can stimulate positive mental health and cognitive development**, it also contributes to the **promotion of tolerance, respect, perseverance, resilience, equity, and solidarity**. Sport participation leads to personal development that is important for realizing youth potential. The UN also recognizes the practice of sport as an **instrument for preventing conflict and promoting long lasting peace and development objectives**. Sport can build bridges between communities, regardless of their cultural differences or political divisions, as it disregards geographical borders, ethnic differences and social classes. It also plays a significant role as a **promoter of social integration and economic empowerment**.

Sport for Development and Peace refers to the use of sport, physical activity and play to attain specific development and peace objectives, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The rise of sport-based development and peacebuilding projects in conflict-affected regions exemplifies how sport has proven capable of easing conflicts that might otherwise have escalated.

Sport is being increasingly recognized as a tool for education, capacity-building and community engagement, and in recent decades, sport-based development initiatives targeting youth have been on the rise. The benefits sport provides to individuals and communities are manifold. At the community level, sport can provide a platform for members of the community to come together, bridging ethnic, racial, religious and other divides, and can be a useful component of peacebuilding and social integration efforts.

Sport has **the capacity to support vulnerable youth** because it is structured around norms, behaviours and rules that are also desirable in the larger community. Participation in sport cultivates a sense of responsibility that can be applied to other areas of life. Youth who are no longer in the formal education system, young people susceptible and vulnerable to joining gangs, and youth who are isolated from other forms of youth engagement can often find a medium for engagement through sports.

Sport offers young people the **opportunity to acquire social capital** through the development of contacts and networks.

There is increasing recognition of the role that sport plays in bringing young people together and in **promoting civic engagement and youth development**.

2. The contribution of Sport to the Youth Peace and Security Agenda

Sport contributes positively to the five pillars identified under the SCR 2250:

- a) **Participation:** Sports, in all disciplines, create opportunities for young people to collaborate and co-create with peers, elders, authorities and other adults in communities, thus providing communities with the opportunity to experience intergenerational dialogue, collaboration and social cohesion.

- b) **Protection:** sports events can be used to communicate key messages and raise awareness on the young people’s rights and aspirations, in particular young women, during armed conflict and in post-conflict times.
- c) **Prevention:** sports contribute to the promotion of a culture of peace, tolerance, and social cohesion, therefore setting the stage and creating an enabling environment for young people to play a critical role in conflict prevention.
- d) **Disengagement and reintegration:** sports are a meaningful way to engage with young people and create a sense of belonging, thus supporting the meaningful inclusive and community-based reintegration of young women and men directly involved in armed conflict.
- e) **Partnerships:** Security Council Resolution 2250 highlights the importance of partnering with youth, local communities and non-governmental actors in countering violence extremism. Sports can create connection between and with traditional and non-traditional actors and offers the opportunity to co-create with young women and men.

The below examples highlight the contribution of sport to the YPS agenda:

a. Preventing Violent Extremism and promote youth-led peacebuilding through sport:

In 2020, the United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism (UNOCT), in partnership with the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI), the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC) and the International Centre for Sport Security (ICSS), initiated the “**UN Global Programme on Security of Major Sporting Events, and Promotion of Sport and Its Values as a Tool to Prevent Violent Extremism**”. The Global Programme aims at developing innovative policies and practices to strengthen the protection of major sporting events, while promoting the values of sport as a powerful means to Prevent Violent Extremism (PVE). To ensure that youth’s unique skills and perspectives on P/CVE through sport are considered by policymakers, UNAOC, in collaboration with the partners, held its first Online Youth Consultation on Preventing Violent Extremism through Sport, on 20-21 January 2021, collecting youth recommendations and creating a dialogue between youth leaders and decision-makers on how to concretize their cooperation. Moreover, the Global Programme included powerful youth-led initiatives in its recently published “Compendium of existing policies, projects and initiatives aimed at making use of sport and its values as a tool to prevent violent extremism” and provided funds to youth-led organizations through its “Grants Mechanism for CSOs”.

In South Sudan, with the support of UNDP and the UN mission, 500 youngsters engaged in competition in their chosen sports, whether it was football, volleyball, basketball or wrestling, in the spirit of promoting peace and social cohesion as part of National Unity Day.¹

Under the leadership of the Ministry of Youth and Sports of the government of Mali, UNDP implemented, jointly with IOM, and with the support of the EU and Denmark, the initiative of peace running trail called “**Grand Trail de la Jeunesse pour la paix**” (2021). The initiative consists in a long-distance relay race of 1500 km, departing from Bamako, and arriving to Gao,

¹ <https://unmiss.unmissions.org/south-sudanese-youth-use-their-passion-sports-build-lasting-peace>

in the North of Mali, following the Niger river. The general objective of the initiative was to increase the participation of young women and young men in the transition and in the reconciliation process in Mali². A massive communication campaign was conducted and included the diffusion of key messages on values embedded in sports, on billboards across cities of Mali, the production and diffusion of a video clip realized with two young Malian artists (slam) on sports for peace³, the identification and engagement with national athletes acting as goodwill ambassadors for the initiative. Separately, under the Prevention of Violent Extremism Project, UNDP Mali organised a series of “**Sports and Cultural Week for PVE**” targeting community members, comprising youth, parents of students, professors, local elected officials, local sports associations, state technical services, with the aim of promoting peace education in the school in order to promote a culture of non-violence among youth. Messages of peace, stories and plays were prepared and presented by the youth during the week.

UNODC, under its Crime Prevention through Sport Initiative with a view to further support Member States in addressing conditions conducive to the spread of terrorism and violent extremism, and in line with the priorities set in the UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism, has developed a set of **tailored guidance tools for policy makers and practitioners on Preventing Violent Extremism through Sport**⁴, including an **e-learning course and provide capacity building on effective use of sport to prevent radicalization and violent extremism among youth**, identifying five areas of intervention through sports, namely safe spaces, social inclusion, education, empowerment and resilience, and acknowledging youth agency and contribution in peace building efforts. Through a series of policy workshops in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uganda, UNODC promoted holistic, youth centered policy frameworks and interventions to prevent violent extremism, using sport as a tool and build the capacity of national actors, including of civil society and youth led organizations and law enforcement, to effectively use sport in this context.⁵

In Tanzania, UNDP has undertaken sports activities with youth, contributing to prevention of violent extremism, in the regions of Tanga, Mwanza and Zanzibar. Several activities and sports tournaments were carried out such as football bonanza, acrobatic, and boat racing, with the participation of security officials and community members. The main objective was to strengthen the relationship between the police force and youth in the community, promote socialization while using an educational approach to promote peace messages in the community. Sports activities also helped to convey an alternative narrative to Violent Extremism. Vulnerable youth were able to be inspired and self-motivated by the activities, they gained confidence, they developed teamwork skills. Sports contributed positively to behavioural change, diverting young people from violent extremism. It also increased their sense of belonging, tolerance, cohesion, and common willingness to sustain peace across communities. In total 1268 youth, including 600 women, took part in the sports activities supported by UNDP under the project of prevention of violent extremism. These sports

² www.trailpourelapaix.org

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4zPeoVQT5O8>

⁴ UNODC, 2020, [Preventing Violent Extremism through Sport, Technical Guide](#), Criminal Justice Handbook Series; UNODC, 2021, [Preventing Violent Extremism through Sport: Practical Guide](#)

⁵ https://www.unodc.org/documents/dohadecaration/Sports/PVE/PVE_Brochure.pdf

activities have also helped to recruit some of the youth for the mentorship program, as part of the same project. The activities have also contributed to the personal development of targeted youth.

b. Engagement, support and protection to refugees, internally displaced persons and other groups impacted by conflict to promote peace, reconciliation, and rehabilitation:

In 2020/21, UNHCR has, in partnership with the Olympic Refugee Foundation, undertaken an independent external evaluation of Sport for Protection projects initiated jointly since 2018. The Sport for Protection approach developed by UNHCR, IOC and Terre des Hommes, aims to work towards achieving one or more of three specific protection outcomes: Social Inclusion, Social Cohesion and Psychosocial Wellbeing, and is brought to life in the “Sport for Protection Toolkit: Programming with young people in forced displacement settings”. Sport for protection projects and programmes aim to achieve the intended outcomes by providing young people with a safe and supportive environment where they have opportunities through sport to build their skills and bring about a positive change in their lives and the lives of others.

Through a comprehensive review of the academic literature on sport for development and peace, including in displacement contexts, and ongoing consultations with sport for development and peace practitioners, academics, protection professionals and young people, UNHCR developed a complementary tool to the Sport for Protection Toolkit, that breaks down the 3 target protection outcome areas into mid-term outcomes and then individual life-skills. By proactively integrating life- skills development into sport initiatives, sport coaches, youth workers, young refugee incentive workers and others delivering sport activities, can target their interventions to achieve specific outcomes that benefit individuals and communities in quite deliberate ways, beyond simply participating in sport activities.

In 2021, UNHCR launched a multiyear Sport for Protection Initiative in Colombia called “**Protection and Social cohesion in Colombia**”, aiming at improving social cohesion through sports, and building young people’s sense of collective safety, increasing social connectedness and further developing skills and capacities, through dedicated sport activities, in Venezuelan refugee and migrant families, Colombian Returnee, Colombian host and Colombian IDP communities living in La Guajira, Putumayo and Norte de Santander. Young people in these locations are at extremely high risk of being affected by armed clashes, drug trafficking, large-group displacements, and homicides, among other risks.

In August 2021, with the support of UNHCR, 6 refugee **Para Olympians** participated in the Olympics in Tokyo, with the opportunity to use the biggest sporting stage in the world to spread messages of inclusion and hope.

c. Strengthen prevention efforts through skills development and empowerment of young people and local communities

UNODC, under the **Youth Crime Prevention through Sport** initiative and the **Line Up Live Up** programme uses sport as a tool to engage young people and build their resilience to violence and crime by strengthening their skills and learning, promoting pro-social behaviours, positive leadership and empowering them. The Line Up Live Up, a sport training curriculum for

youth, builds important life skills of young people, through tailored sessions, promotes positive behavioural change and challenges harmful normative beliefs and stereotypes linked to violence and criminality and conflict and promotes social inclusion, tolerance and respect. The Line Up live Up programme has been implemented in fourteen countries engaging vulnerable youth and communities, including those struggling with gang violence and impacted by widespread community violence, including gang violence and conflicts.

For example, in **Mexico**, in 2021, the programme implemented in two states and six municipalities, reaching over 900 young boys and girls, helping them build their skills and resilience, and empowering them in taking positive leadership roles. To this end, young people working together with parents, families, and other local community members, recovered public sport facilities in marginalised areas and transform them to safe public spaces where community members can meet and positively interact and develop. **In Lebanon**, UNODC supported over 300 youth in juvenile facilities and in border communities, through empowerment, skills development and learning, supporting their inclusion and integration in partnership with state actors and local authorities. Civil society and youth led organizations were also supported through grants, following the Beirut Blast, using sport as a tool for social cohesion and reconciliation reaching out to over 100 children and youth.

d. Foster mutual respect, social cohesion, understanding and long-term positive relationships between peoples of different cultures and religions:

In Lesotho, UNDP supported the Hands for life association, which organized a cross-country bike ride aiming at connecting with youth all over the country and promoting the SDGs. The activity helped young people to create partnerships through sports. The campaign crossed 10 districts, motivating and engaging with community leaders, youth and school children for SDGs awareness.

To demonstrate the power of sports as a tool for diversity and inclusiveness, UNAOC launched in 2020 the **#OneHumanity Campaign** in partnership with Fundación Atlético de Madrid, La Liga and The Global Association of Sports Federations (GAISF). The campaign aims at enforcing the notion of sports as an equalizer for social inclusion bringing people together from diverse cultures, religions and ethnicities. It also capitalizes on the star power of sport celebrities and engage them as role models for young people especially in the underprivileged neighborhoods⁶.

In Uzbekistan, UNODC implemented sport-based interventions in partnership with national authorities and sport actors in Tashkent and Vergara Valley, an area featuring densely populated and multi-ethnic settlements where disputes across communities and challenges emanating from violent extremist groups arise. Through sport-based training delivered in public schools, young people learn to condemn violence, obtain skills to resolve conflicts in a non-violent manner and are empowered to act as change makers including by building their

⁶ <https://www.unaoc.org/2021/02/video-laliga-and-unaoc-join-forces-on-onehumanity-campaign-to-promote-global-change/>

skills and competencies promoting positive behaviours and positive leadership skills. This Programme helped to build dialogue among young people and their families and their school and community members. In covid times, an online sport challenge for young people and their families was launched to promote mental and physical health and overcome anxiety and stress, strengthen positive relationships within families and communities and address other challenges related to the pandemic and prolonged confinement, engaging more than 20 000 young people.

e. Communicate key messages harnessing the youth, peace and security agenda and promoting the culture of peace with and towards young women and men

In Palestine, in 2021, with UNODC's support, a selected group of young teachers, trainers, and mass communication students received 20 virtual sessions of training on developing their own audio-visual material, along with messaging on violence, crime and drug use and on the role of sport in building youth and community resilience. As a result of this group training, participants developed 11 films which addressed the role of sport in their lives, communities and professional work. Building on these videos developed by the youth, a series of discussions and sport-based activities in schools and local communities were initiated to discuss violence, crime and conflict.⁷

In Nigeria, UNDP is implementing, in partnership with IOM and UNICEF, the EU Support for reconciliation and reintegration of former armed non-state combatants and Boko Haram associates (S2R). This EU supported project aims to enhance stability through provision of alternatives to violence and enhanced social cohesion and is implemented in Borno, Adamawa and Yobe States.

The community led [Peace through Sports Engagement](#) has been undertaken in locations hit hardest by the insurgency, thus seeking to strengthen social engagement and rebuild intercommunal trust, which is foundational to community healing and peaceful co-existence. Over 500 youths from the IDP camps and host community in Bama, Banki and Gwoza have had an opportunity to interact through football tournaments and training sessions that build fitness, achieve psycho-social relief, address frustrations, provide team building and community spirit to mitigate tensions that can often lead to conflicts. At the community level, sport has been a tool used to encourage strong community bonds, promote social cohesion, and reduce crime rates. This programme also provides positive diversion for young people to express themselves and build pro-social, leadership, dialogue and conflict resolution skills.

The initiative has also provided **mental health and psycho-social support** sessions for victims of insurgency in Northeast Nigeria. It has sought to create an enabling environment that helps to develop coping skills, heal from the scars of the conflict and subsequently build community resilience.

3. Key Recommendations

⁷ <https://www.unodc.org/dohadeclaration/en/news/2021/04/amplifying-the-stories-of-palestinian-youth-amid-covid-19.html>

- Sport can be an exclusionary activity, particularly for young people with disabilities, young migrants, and young women; ensuring the full and meaningful inclusion of these and other such groups in sport-based activity is necessary for successful sport-for-development programming, and is in line with a “leave no one behind” approach.
- Sports can be a way to mobilize and engage with young people from diverse backgrounds, regardless of their gender, nationality, community, etc. It can also be used as an agile tool for communication of key messages through role models for youth.
- The COVID-19 and its multiple impacts, in particular on the youth population, has confirmed the need to invest in psychosocial support and mental health, for and with young women and men. Sports can be an effective way to contribute positively to youth mental health and to promote active engagement.
- Sports, engaging young man and woman, promote behavioural change, increase trust between youth groups, and thus enhancing their role in peacebuilding as positive and resilient agents of change.
- Sporting activities and programmes must be part of holistic approaches and linked to existing initiatives and work within the community focused on youth development. For example, an organization working with vulnerable youth in an after-school programme may include sporting activities to reinforce specific skills and attributes such as collaboration, teamwork and negotiation, which has a positive impact on other work being carried out.
- There is no causal relationship between sport and peace building, conflict and violence prevention efforts; the way that sport programmes are designed and delivered is key in achieving such objectives. Therefore, tailored guidance tools, capacity building and monitoring and evaluation activities are essential in strengthening the contribution of sport in sustainable development and peace building.

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