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The Importance of Sport for Development (SfD) for the Social Recovery of the 2020 Pandemic. Directions for Policy Makers¹

Ioanna Maria Kantartzi² & Eric MacIntosh³

Abstract

In 2010, Kofi Annan supported that sports power must be used as an agent for social change (Kofi Annan Foundation, 2010). Sports are a great dynamic not only for social change to be realized, but also for development within high performance sport systems, as they can be a conduit to peace. Furthermore, sports contribute to personal, but also to community development as it can teach people the importance of team and co-existing. During the 21st century, many important initiatives have been taken place aiming to boost the field called Sport for Development (SfD); nevertheless, different types of crisis such as financial (Földesi, 2014), and COVID-19 crisis (Wong et al., 2020) globally have complicated the development work that uses sport as a tool for various desired outcomes. The 2020 pandemic agitated the international community and made it difficult for sport activities to be operated. The quarantine periods and the various enforcement, laws, policies and recommendations have anecdotally caused more serious harms to groups of people (demographics like women, children, adolescents) (Bullinger et al., 2020). Individuals, especially women and kids were trapped during the quarantine with their abusers, having limited access to help and social activities; activities that aim to empower people, develop their skills and critical thinking. The current paper examines the SfD field and its importance for social development; briefly describes the effects of the lock down on the maximization of abuse, racism and discrimination and finally, proposes directions to be taken into consideration by policy makers so as to minimize the aforementioned phenomena and at the same time strengthen the SfD field.

Keywords: Sport for Development; COVID-19; development; policy directions; sports.

Introduction

In our daily life, the word sport is connected with thoughts of play, physical activity or even with activities concerning the support of teams to which we are involved. However, sport has received a deeper attention over the past years through the movement of Sport for Development (SfD), which promotes sports as a useful tool for personal and collective development (Kay & Dudfield, 2013, Lyras & Peachey, 2011).

SfD has been described as the purposeful use of sports to promote development objectives and increase individuals access not only to education, but also, to assist with unemployment issues and raise awareness about health matters such as HIV and AIDS (Commonwealth Youth Sport for

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Development and Peace Working Group, 2015). Also, it has been supported that “ the use of sport to exert a positive influence on public health, the socialization of children, youths and adults, the social inclusion of the disadvantaged, the economic development of regions and states, and on fostering intercultural exchange and conflict resolution” (Lyras & Peachey, 2011:311).

In a recent article published by the International Paralympic Committee (IPC) it has been supported that sports promote healthy lifestyle, as they help prevent chronic diseases and contribute to the promotion of physical and mental well-being (IPC, 2020). Furthermore, sports can be used as a tool for social development, as they promote sex equality, contribute to the empowerment of female and battles gender stereotypes (IPC, 2020). Additionally, in accordance to skill development and employment, sports are social exclusionary as they allow individuals from different sociopolitical background to participate in activities and develop their personal skills. (International Paralympic Committee, 2020). Significantly important is the fact that sports promote world peace as they bring people and nations together especially in international sport event and competitions, helps them to develop tolerance and strength and become more culturally sensitive (International Paralympic Committee, 2020). Also, sports promote environmental and ecological awareness through the promotion of a sustainable lifestyles (International Paralympic Committee, 2020). Consequently, it can be supported that sport have the power to change the world, to empower, inspire, understand individual and nation’s need as well as break down racial barriers (Bescsik & Doczi, 2019).

Sports, plenty of times, have been recognised as tool for social control and nation building (Commonwealth Youth Sport for Development and Peace Working Group, 2015; Forsyth, 2007; Howell, 2001, cited in MacIntosh, 2016); however, sports importance for development and peace is not a new trend. SfD has been in the centre of discussion since many years ago and it is often accepted as a universal human right. More specifically, sport has been acknowledged by the UNICEF as the forgotten right. According to the UNICEF’s Convention on the Rights of the Child Implementation manual “children’s right to play is sometimes referred to as the ‘forgotten right.’”(UNICEF, 2007) For this reason, UNICEF, in 2014 at the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow, did an athlete fund raising event for the first time where benefits went to sport projects for youth aiming to save and change the lives of millions of children across the Commonwealth (UNICEF, 2014).

According to this action it can be said that there are signs that the international aid community, governmental organizations, and civil society are looking for ways to obtain recognition for this forgotten right. They are interested in sports as a tool for addressing some of the challenges that arise from humanitarian crisis and in conflicts and post-conflict settings (Gaffney, 2018:3).

There have been many attempts during years to promote sports as a tool for development and many initiatives promoting the importance of sport has been taken through years. During 1992, the United Nations (UN), the International Labour Organization and the International Olympic Committee, signed a partnership agreement that promotes sports and recognizes it as important element on the sociopolitical arena (Bescsik & Doczi, 2019). In 1993, the UN General Assembly accepted the 48/11 Resolution about the Olympic Truce and a year later, one of the biggest SfD organizations named Right to Play, was established by Johann Koss, a three times gold medalist during the Winter Olympic Games in Lillehammer of Norway (Bescsik & Doczi, 2019).

In 2000, the UN officially acknowledged the contribution that sports can have in the Millennium Development Goal Agenda, and this acknowledge has as a result the establishment of hundreds of NGO's in SfD (Bescsik & Doczi, 2019, Burnett, 2015). One of the most important initiatives that will stay in history, was the establishment of the United Nations Office on Sport for Development and Peace in 2001, a significant agent in the SfD field (Beutler, 2008). Two years later, the Magglingen Declaration was published, and the first International Conference on Sport and Development takes place and addresses the significance of sport in conflict prevention and peace promotion (Bescsik & Doczi, 2019). The year 2005 was acknowledged the United Nation's International Year of Sport and Physical Education, and the Sport for Development and Peace International Working Group was established the same year.

As it can be seen, many initiatives in promoting SfD have been achieved; however, the 21st century has not been helpful enough for further development of the field, not only because of the global financial crises in 2008 and the humanitarian crisis in 2011, but most importantly due to the biggest health crisis in the century, called COVID-19.

COVID-19 and social crisis

After the first case of COVID-19 in the Republic of China during 2019, the Director General of the World Health Organization announced the outbreak of the virus (WHO, 2020), and countries all over the globe adopted restrictive measure to be protected by the new crisis (Kantartzi & Karlis 2020). These measures not only made people to self-isolate for months, but also follow social distancing measures, which were aiming to protect individuals from exposing to the virus. Sport facilities all over the globe suspended their operations and people left without access to hobbies concerning physical and mental health activities. On the top of this crisis, it has been observed that violence rates become higher, as many victims were trapped with their abusers. In the United Kingdom (UK), the first weeks of the lockdown, 14 women and 2 children were murdered (The Department of Global

Communication, 2020). The UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres supported that during the pandemic “plenty of women have trapped with abusive partners” (The Department of Global Communication, 2020).

On the top of this social crisis, the 2020 movement #black_lives_matter, reminded the world that problematic phenomena like racial discrimination, not only still exist and exacerbated during the pandemic, but also have the power to cause new disturbances in societies.

Suggestion for policy makers

As it can be seen, today more than ever people need to feel strong, be further educated, and create a character that can help them stand for their needs and believes. Today, more than ever there is a need for more SfD practices. Policy makers should take into consideration that SfD is about social outcomes of interest (e.g. educating about HIV, Corona virus, fundraising for Corona efforts etc.). The main impetus is that SfD is about achieving the millennium development goals, do good for communities that use sports as a tool to bring people in for educational purposes and learning opportunities. Thus, policies that will allow people have access to sport activities, safely socialize and promote body and mental health should be made. For these reasons, the following directions for policy makers should be taken into consideration:

1) Access to social distancing sports

There are many types of sports that can help people maintain a healthy lifestyle and at the same time escape from the pressure caused by the pandemic. Tennis, cycling, golf and swimming are some types of sports that can be safe for individuals during the pandemic. In these games people have plenty of space between them, hence they can play safely. In a domestic level, tournaments on the abovementioned sports in open-air stadiums not only will help people maintain mental health, but also keep them active and productive, help young kids to socialize and develop social skills during these devastating times.

2) Financial investment to social distancing sport activities

It is about time for government to re-act and create more facilities that can host the aforementioned social distancing sports. People these days need their governments to take care of them and their children. Parents need their children to socialize, be educated, and surrounded by people and activities that can help kids develop their skills. By investing more money in SfD activities, countries will not only show that they care about their people, but also, they will feel national pride if kids will be in a position to develop skills during this difficult health crisis.

3) *Boost e-Learning sport activities by Sport Organizations*

Technology these days is dominating our lives evermore so now, during the pandemic of 2020. International Sport Organizations should take advantage of the use of internet to create e-sport activities that can encourage youth to stay active. Younger generations raised with the many advantages that technology offers, could become more educated and develop personal skills such as problem solving, coping strategy and other skill developments of interest to enable self-confidence whilst connecting with other individuals.

4) *Boost role models programs*

Adults and especially well-known athletes can play an important role in adolescents' development. Role models have the ability to positively influence young adults, virtually engage with them and create discussions on social topics like poverty, racism, abuse etc, aiming to raise awareness. IOC has already young role model program in the Youth Olympic Games (MacIntosh et al., 2019) and their actions can be an example for further development of similar programs. These programs can mobilize the young generation to critically think about problems that keep societies away from positive progress. The programs can contribute to the development of healthy ideas and respectful actions as young athletes compete and give back to their sport and local community (MacIntosh et al., 2019). According to social cognitive theory, humans learn by observing the behaviour of other individuals (Schunk & Zimmerman, 1996); hence, young adults can still learn by role models and develop skills during these devastating times.

Conclusion

The current paper while focusing on the SfD and its importance, provided an overview of its challenges by the restricted measures after the expansion of COVID-19 pandemic. Four directions have been suggested to be taken under consideration, aiming to help and further support individuals who are trapped in their homes and do not have access to sport activities; hence, these people do not have the chance to develop their personal and professional skills. Universally, it should be understood that sports can help people stay active, but also can be used by organizations, institutions and governments as a tool for development.

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