

USING SPORT AS A TOOL TO FOSTER CHILDREN'S RIGHTS: EXPERIENCE OF RIGHT TO PLAY

Anna Alexandrova and Johann O. Koss

Introduction

Poverty, violence, social inequality, rapid urbanization, the HIV epidemic, and an erosion of traditional values create a challenging environment for development in many of the world's countries. With a lot of nations lagging behind their commitments to achieve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), innovative approaches to development are urgently needed.

Over the last decade, there has been a growing recognition that well-designed, sport-based initiatives can be a powerful and simple, low-cost and effective means to achieve development and peace objectives,¹ including those pertaining to furthering childhood development.

Sport for Development and Peace, an international movement that evolved out of this recognition, defines sport as "all forms of physical activity that contribute to physical fitness, mental well-being and social interaction, such as play, recreation, organized or competitive sport, and indigenous sports and games."² In this case, sport is viewed both as valuable in it-

self and as a means to achieving broader aims for development and peace.

Play is one of the most distinctive features of early childhood, one that separates it from adulthood. The importance of play in early childhood was once again reiterated by the Committee on the Rights of the Child in its General Comment:³

"Play is one of the most distinctive features of early childhood. Through play, children both enjoy and challenge their current capacities, whether they are playing alone or with others. The value of creative play and exploratory learning is widely recognized in early childhood education. Yet realizing the right to rest, leisure and play is often hindered by a shortage of opportunities for young children to meet, play and interact in child-centered, secure, supportive, stimulating and stress-free environments."⁴

Despite numerous international commitments to protect childhood, including the recognition of childhood protection as part of the Millennium agenda the outcome document of

the UN General Assembly Special Session on Children,⁵ for many of the world's disadvantaged children today, childhood as a time to grow, learn, play and feel safe, does not exist. Millions of children have to take on adult roles caring for their families and siblings, while others are recruited as child combatants or forced into early marriages.

Recognizing this reality, Right To Play uses specially-designed sport and play programs to improve health, build life skills, and foster peace for children and communities affected by war, poverty, disease. Working in both the humanitarian and development contexts, Right To Play believes that the welfare of the child is paramount and focuses on using sport and play for basic education and child development; conflict resolution and peace education; health promotion and disease prevention, and community development and participation.

Sport for development and peace and the human rights framework

Sport, in its widest definition, has a firm place in the rights-based approach to international development due to its links to individual development and sustained economic growth; its power to foster healthy child development, teach positive values and life skills, strengthen education, prevent disease (including HIV), improve overall health and well-being, but most importantly in ensuring that children all over the world experience childhood as a time to grow, play, rest and learn.

While there is no specific "right to sport" found in the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UNDHR), sport in its widest definition is more than a part of the right to rest and leisure.⁶

The widely recognized health benefits of sport make it an important tool in attaining "a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and the family."⁷ The convening power of sport can be successfully used to ensure that compulsory primary education is "directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms."⁸ Furthermore, sport can be an important vehicle to help ensure gender parity in primary education, a goal which according to a recent UNICEF report is yet to be achieved.⁹ Some of the examples of the potential of sport to break gender barriers and promote health are provided in this article.

As it pertains to promoting "understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups," and furthering "the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace;"¹⁰ sport's contribution to strengthening peace and friendship among all nations is well-documented throughout the history of the Olympic Games and the Olympic Truce. Participation in sport, whether as a player or a spectator allows one to fulfill his or her right to participate in a cultural life of their community.¹¹

The International Covenants and treaties subsequent to the UNDHR re-affirmed and expanded the rights outlined in the UNDHR. Childhood should be a separate space from adulthood, and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) delineates rights that are particular to children and distinct from adults. The CRC is the most widely adopted UN Convention, with only two UN Member States failing to ratify or access to it.¹² It contains the most far-reaching and comprehensive commit-

ments of the international community to children to ensure that their rights – to survival, health, education, protection, and play – are met.

While the CRC does not specifically recognize or define the “right to sport,” it makes a strong case for the right of a child (defined as anyone under 18 years of age) to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.¹³ This commitment to ensure a child’s right to play is supported by the Committee on the Rights of the Child, a monitoring body for the Convention that encourages governments to consider the development of a child’s “physical abilities to their fullest potential”¹⁴ as part of the right to education.

In a Right To Play project in Grumeti, Tanzania, teachers notice first-hand the power of sport to improve school attendance: On days with sports practice, teachers report that attendance is significantly higher. Even those students who do regularly attend school make an extra effort to be present on a sports day.

A holistic approach to education is not possible without an appropriate balance between various aspects of education, with physical education being one of them.¹⁵

Due to the existing gender roles in many communities that mandate that girls help their families and take care of their siblings, girls often do not have an opportunity to engage in leisure and play activities. In many countries due to restrictive gender norms, participation of girls in physical activity and sport is discouraged. Recognizing this particular vulnerability of girls, the Committee called upon the State Parties to the Convention to pay special attention to girls’ right to play, and encouraged them

to allocate adequate resources to the implementation of this human right.

The International Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, specifically recognizes the right of children with disabilities to participate in leisure and sport activities,¹⁶ and obliges the State Parties to ensure children with disabilities enjoy “equal access with other children to participation in play, recreation and leisure and sporting activities, including those activities in the school system.”¹⁷

Right To Play considers the interest of the child paramount to its activities, and builds its work around the key principles set out in the international human rights framework. Below two aspects of Right To Play’s use of sport to attain the development objectives are explored, namely the use of sport to promote health and prevent disease, and ensure gender equity.

Health promotion and disease prevention through sport and play

By providing regular opportunities for physical activity and play that enhance overall physical fitness and help to alleviate stress, sport-based projects can contribute to the fulfillment of the right of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health.¹⁸ In addition, the convening power of sport can help reduce the vulnerability of children and young people to substance abuse, pre-mature, unprotected or unwanted sexual activity and the transmission of infectious diseases.

In Thailand, Right To Play works with children of Burmese and Thai migrant workers and adult health promoters to improve community health by both providing accessible health education through sports and games and promoting healthy child development through physical

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01 In Right To Play programs in Pakistan girls are expressing themselves through sport and play.

02 Girls enjoy a creativity game in Right To Play's Thailand Migrant Project.

03 A coach leads Right To Play games.



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activity. The Thailand Migrant Project operates in three provinces along the border region between Thailand and Burma, where large numbers of Burmese migrants have crossed the border into Thailand. Migrants often find it difficult to access government health services that combined with the mobility of the migrant population, present a major challenge in disease management.

This project employs a set of simple games with health messages relating to infectious diseases. The active learning in these health games is extremely effective in reaching children, and involving adults who often come to join the game or enjoy it as spectators. This project serves up to 1,000 children every month, including 700 school children involved in regular sport and play activities and 300 children who participate in monthly community-based health events and games.

The HIV and AIDS epidemic remains a serious development challenge for the international community. Children and youth, especially girls are extremely vulnerable to HIV. According to UNAIDS, in Zambia, South Africa and Zimbabwe, over 75% of young people living with HIV and AIDS are female.¹⁹ Numerous reports of international agencies have demonstrated that a focus on children and youth can greatly contribute to halting, and ultimately reversing, the spread of the epidemic.²⁰ Knowledge and information about HIV and AIDS are the first lines of defense for young people. Sport-based programs can become important tools in fighting the epidemic by empowering youth and providing them with knowledge, information, negotiation skills, respect for others, and understanding of inclusion. “Live Safe, Play Safe” is Right To Play’s skills-based health education module that uses games and activities

to carry prevention and information messages about HIV and AIDS among children and young people. Through inclusive sport and play activities in Zambia, Uganda, Liberia, Tanzania, Mozambique, Mali, Rwanda, Ghana and Ethiopia, Right To Play works with children, youth and their communities to increase their knowledge, change attitudes, reduce stigma associated with the disease, and build skills among its project participants to respond assertively to peer-pressure, plan for the future, and use condoms properly.

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¹ UN Inter-Agency Task Force on Sport for Development and Peace, Sport for Development

- and Peace: Towards Achieving the Millennium Development Goals (UN, 2003), p. 7.
- 2 Ibid. p. 2.
 - 3 While these Comments do not have a legally binding force, they represent guidelines for the State Parties to the Convention to follow when reporting on their progress in implementing the Convention to the Committee.
 - 4 CRC/C/GC/7.Rev.1 (September 20, 2006).
 - 5 UN GA Resolution "A World Fit for Children," A/Res/S-27/2, online: http://www.unicef.org/specialsession/docs_new/documents/A-RES-S27-2E.pdf (date accessed 29.07.2007).
 - 6 UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, *infra* note 4, Article 24.
 - 7 UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, GA Res 217 (III) (December 10, 1948), Article 25 (1).
 - 8 Ibid. Article 26 (1, 2).
 - 9 UNICEF, "The State of the World's Children 2006: Excluded and Invisible" (UNICEF, 2006), p. 18; online: http://www.unicef.org/sowco6/pdfs/sowco6_fullreport.pdf (date accessed 27.06.2007).
 - 10 UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, *ibid.* Article 26 (1, 2).
 - 11 UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights, *ibid.* Article 27 (1).
 - 12 See Convention on the Rights of the Child Status of Ratification, online at OHCHR: <http://www.ohchr.org/english/countries/ratification/11.htm> (date accessed 26.06.2007).
 - 13 Convention on the Rights of the Child, GA Res 22/45 (1989), Article 31.
 - 14 CRC/GC/2001/1 (April 17, 2001).
 - 15 CRC/GC/2001/1 (April 17, 2001), 12.
 - 16 Disability Convention, Article 30.
 - 17 Disability Convention, Article 30 (5).
 - 18 Convention on the Rights of the Child, *supra* note 10, Article 24.
 - 19 UNAIDS, Fact Sheet "Action on Women, Girls and HIV/AIDS: Southern Africa," online: http://womenandaids.unaids.org/documents/factsheet_general.pdf (date accessed 28.07.2007).
 - 20 UNICEF, UNAIDS, WHO "Young People and HIV/AIDS: Opportunity in Crisis" (2002), p.11, p. 24. online: UNICEF/Publications, <http://www.unicef.org>.
 - 21 The Maastricht Guidelines on Violations of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 20 Hum. Rts. Q. 691 (1998).
 - 22 Sport for Development: The way forward, A/61/373, online: UN Database, <http://daccessdds.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/No6/531/14/PDF/No653114.pdf?OpenElement> (accessed 21.03. 2007).
 - 23 For more information on the Sport for Development and Peace International Working Group, please see International Platform on Sport and Development, online: <http://www.sportanddev.org>.

Johann O. Koss is a four-time Olympic Gold medalist in speed-skating. Johann is President and CEO of Toronto-based Right To Play, a humanitarian organization committed to improving the lives of the children through sport. Under his leadership, Right To



Play has grown into an internationally respected NGO with operations in over 20 countries. Johann is the recipient of numerous awards including Sportsman of the Year by Sports Illustrated and the Child Survival Award by the Carter Center. Johann was also declared “One of 100 Future Leaders of Tomorrow” by TIME Magazine, and “One of 1,000 Global Leaders” by the World Economic Forum. In January 2006, the World Economic Forum named Johann a Young Global Leader.

AUTHORS

Anna Alexandrova holds a law degree from the International University of Moscow, and a Master of Laws degree (LL.M.) in Reproductive and Sexual Health Law from the University of Toronto. Anna has worked in HIV and AIDS prevention, international development and human rights advocacy internationally and in Canada. An avid runner and athlete, Anna is a Manager, Policy, with Right To Play.

