

# THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD AND SPORTS

**Adolf Ogi, United Nations Under-Secretary-General and Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on Sport for Development and Peace**  
**Interviewed by Thomas Kirchschräger**

*How was this special mandate created?*

**Ogi:** Politics, economy, science, religion and culture have long been engaged to resolve conflicts and create a better world, with many good outcomes, but also significant failures. Kofi Annan, the former Secretary-General of the United Nations, brought the missing element of sport to the toolbox for achieving the Millennium Development Goals. His idea was to use the compelling and convening power of sport to be employed wherever it may seem useful or where other means may have failed.

I first met Mr. Kofi Annan in 2000, in my then capacity as President of the Swiss Confederation. After I left the Swiss government at the end of 2000, he asked me to serve as the first Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on Sport for Development and Peace.

*What goals does the United Nations pursue through this position and what is the role of the Special Adviser?*

**Ogi:** As enshrined in various United Nations General Assembly resolutions pertaining to sport, the Organisation uses sport to achieve

specific development objectives such as the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) embodied in the 2000 Millennium Declaration adopted by all the Heads of Member States. The United Nations views sport as an instrument to promote health, education, development and peace.

The Special Adviser has three roles:

- 1.** Representative – representing the Secretary-General and the United Nations system at important global sports events and other strategically important fora.
- 2.** Advocate – leading the efforts of the United Nations system at a high political level to promote understanding and support for sport as a tool for contributing to poverty reduction, universal education, gender equality, environmental sustainability, the combat of HIV/AIDS and other diseases, as well as peace-building and conflict resolution.
- 3.** Facilitator – encouraging dialogue, collaboration and partnerships around sport for development and peace between the United Nations and Member States, international sports

organizations, the civil society, the private sector and the media. The Special Adviser provides the entry point to the United Nations system for the outside world with regard to sports for development and peace.

*In which countries are you active?*

**Ogi:** One of the key elements of sport is that it knows no borders. Our approach to sport includes all Member States without exception. However, all countries do not have the same needs. In developed countries, sport is mainly used to promote health, in particular to fight overweight and obesity, and to promote a better lifestyle in general. In developing countries, sport turns into an effective instrument in the development process to achieve the MDGs. In countries recovering from tensions and conflict, sport is a powerful vehicle to create an atmosphere of tolerance and understanding, assist traumatized youth and children and reintegrate former child soldiers into civil society.

*How should we concretely understand your work?*

**Ogi:** I travel the world, representing the United Nations and the Secretary-General at sports events and international conferences. I use these opportunities to raise awareness about the limitless potential of sport which has not been fully recognized and harnessed, and to create effective networks among the key stakeholders. In order to effectively advocate sport as a tool for development and peace, I need to develop and maintain close contacts with government officials, high-level United Nations officials, decision-makers in the world of sport, and leaders from the private sector, academia, and the media. I encourage these actors to employ sport for peace and development by building partnerships in order to share experiences,

mobilize resources and collaborate together for innovative and creative approaches for a better world.

During my field visits, I witness each time how sport can bring great benefit to all segments of the population and especially to children. To give you an example: Earlier this year, in March, I was in Liberia to launch a new “Sport for Peace” programme, which we have set up together with the United Nations Mission in Liberia (UNMIL), the Liberian government and the International Olympic Committee (IOC). The programme initially lasted five weeks but its impact was deep and long lasting. It has contributed to the process of reconciliation in a country which has been ravaged by civil war for 14 years and has affected the development of an entire generation. Sport can help the young people from Liberia to recover from the war and allow them to regain a sense of normalcy.

*Are you welcome everywhere with open arms, or do you face resistance? If so, what kind of resistance have you encountered?*

**Ogi:** “Sport brings people together”: This is my message, and it is a positive one!

I work as the ambassador of the best values of sport, addressing people who are victims of grave and painful issues, such as terrorism and HIV/AIDS. My message brings them hope and a new way to confront and overcome their challenges. That is why I am always welcome wherever I go and by people from all conditions and backgrounds.

My interlocutors might sometimes argue that sport also carries negative aspects, and I concede. Nevertheless, they seldom, if ever, disagree with me on its positive potential.

The resistance I face comes mainly from governments of the industrialized world, who do not understand that “sport for all” must be increasingly supported and mainstreamed, and that this implies adequate financing of programmes and infrastructure.

*What is the significance of children and youth in your mandate and what can you concretely do for them?*

**Ogi:** Children and youth are extremely important in my mandate: They represent the primary target of my message on sport. Children are the leaders of tomorrow, hence the importance of an education instilling the positive values of sport for life. We are sowing the seeds, but it is they who will reap the benefits.

Regarding concrete actions, I would like to underline that my office does not directly implement projects or programmes on the ground. My role is rather to encourage the many actors in the field to incorporate sport in their relevant programmes. An example is the cooperation between UNHCR and the NGO Right To Play to bring sport to refugee camps all over the world. Visiting these war-affected children in refugee camps, I instantly notice the gloomy environment in which they are living. I am deeply moved by the sadness on their faces. But as soon as we introduce sport and allow them to play and share a moment of joy, I see their eyes gleaming again. I see hope for a better future.

*What children’s rights do concretely pertain to your mandate?*

**Ogi:** There are many linkages between sport and children’s rights as provided in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). I will give you three examples.

One of the children’s rights is the protection from all forms of discrimination as stated in Article 2 of the CRC: Through its inclusiveness, sport facilitates the integration of groups suffering from discrimination, such as girls, children belonging to minority groups, children living in poverty, and children with disabilities, to give a few illustrations.

Another instance is the right to leisure and recreational activities (Art. 31), in other words, the right to play: The practice of sport provides a scope for a high degree and wide range of recreational activity, as it not only entertains, but also ensures a healthy lifestyle and keeps children and teenagers away from deviant behaviour, crime and violence.

Sport is also a very effective reintegration and rehabilitation tool for psychologically or physically traumatized children, as it helps materialize the rights of the child victim (Art. 39).

To reiterate, these are just some examples, but the possibilities of the ways in which sport promotes respect for the rights of children are unlimited.

*Is it sufficient to build football fields or to send balls and sports shoes in order to make a better future possible for children?*

**Ogi:** Here the answer is twofold. First, in the overall development process, sport contributes to improving living conditions of children in need, giving them an opportunity to necessary physical activity, to remain healthy and to learn indispensable social skills. As such, sport is a tool to help achieve key aspects of the development process, such as education and health, thus making it possible for children to have a more positive future.

Second, focusing on the use of sport for development and peace in the field, sport equip-

ment and facilities (the “hardware”) are of course necessary and important. However, well-designed sustainable projects and programmes and appropriate coaching (the “software”) are keys to fully exploit the benefits sport can bring to children and youth.

*What do children and youth learn through sport?*

**Ogi:** They learn fundamental values and basic social skills, which they can apply in their everyday life, such as respect for the opponent, acceptance of the rules, solidarity and fair-play. They learn to win, without thinking they are necessarily the best. They learn to lose, without thinking that it is the end of the world. Sport provides children with the opportunity to make mistakes that have no serious consequences beyond the game.

I repeat the dictum wherever I go: Sport is the best school of life! And every child – without any exception – should have the opportunity to go through that school!

*What influence do you have? At which level (political, economic) is your message heard?*

**Ogi:** My previous functions in politics and the private sector allow me to approach top level representatives in almost any field. As United Nations Under-Secretary-General, I not only meet high-ranking officials within the UN system but also Heads of State and Government, CEOs of leading corporations in the sport industry, to name a few. I believe that my voice is heard and it has lasting impact. As an example of successful influence, I was able to convince the UN Member States of the positive aspects sport provides to help achieve a better world, and the General Assembly adopted relevant resolutions in a very short span of time – for United Nations standards.

We are at a point where sport as a development-promoting instrument is benefiting from growing visibility and recognition. This is encouraging. Our cause advances well.

Although my mandate is to encourage relevant actors to use sport as a bearer of hope, the message I strive to convey primarily addresses the grassroots: I promote sport for all; my message then must be and is listened to by all! There are results.

*Could you not draw attention to the implementation of the CRC in your contacts with politicians?*

Yes I can, and I am doing it! As I mentioned earlier, children represent the primary target of my work; they are very closely linked to my mandate. Today, not every child has free access to sport and play. The right to play enshrined in the CRC is thus often referred to as the forgotten right. When an opportunity occurs, I remind States Parties and other actors of their obligation to undertake concrete measures to ensure the implementation of the CRC.

*What have you achieved so far as Special Adviser?*

**Ogi:** That is difficult to say; maybe it is the International Year of Sport and Physical Education 2005. We had to convince the Member States that it is important to highlight the positive potential of sport by celebrating an international year. We started with no budget but a lot of passion and were able to build up a momentum. The International Year has served as a launching pad for thousands of initiatives, and many of them subsequently turned into sustainable programmes using sport as an instrument to promote development and peace. We have been able to mobilize millions of people.

**Adolf Ogi** was appointed in February 2001 to the



task of assisting the United Nations Secretary-General in his efforts to reach out to the world of sports in order to promote understanding and support for the work and ideals of the United Nations. His mandate as

Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on Sport for Development and Peace is oriented not only towards the world of sports, sports industries and governments, but also towards United Nations funds, programs and specialized agencies. On the initiative of Mr. Ogi, the United Nations proclaimed 2005 the International Year of Sport and Physical Education in order to encourage governments, the world of sports, and other partners to use the power of sports to promote education, health, development and peace. Adolf Ogi was Director of the Swiss Skiing Federation from 1971 to 1981. He also took an active part in the "Fédération Internationale de Ski" from 1971 to 1983. In 1981, he became a director and board member of Intersport Switzerland Holding AG. Mr Ogi was a member

of Parliament from 1979, and was elected Federal Councilor in 1987. As such, he was in charge of the Federal Department for Transport, Communications and Energy from 1988 to 1995, then of the Federal Department of Defense, Civil Protection and Sports from 1995 to 2000. In 1993 and in 2000 he was President of the Swiss Confederation.