

Sport as an enabler of Sustainable Development: A review of UN initiatives promoting sustainability through Sport

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Abstract

In December 2018, United Nations declared Sport as an important enabler of sustainable development in its 73rd General Assembly. Prior to this declaration, the UN Office of Sport for Peace and Development actively engaged with stakeholders in formulating policies and linkages between diverse sectors with the objective of realizing health, education and social inclusion objectives. Sport has been used by agencies as a medium of promoting integration, tolerance and inclusivity in society. The primary objective of this paper is to assess the past impact and future potential of Sport in social development, specifically relating to UN's initiatives towards Sustainable Development Goals.

Introduction

Sustainable Development has been defined as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. There are two main aspects to this – first, the needs of the poor must not be given priority, and the other is that certain limits must be set on the dependence of technology and society on the environment to ensure present and future needs are met.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted at the United Nations Summit in New York from 25 to 27 September 2015. This is a broad and universal policy agenda, with 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Building on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the 2030 Agenda has been defined with clearer concepts and more specific goals, yet there are clear inter-linkages amongst all the goals. It aims to guide Member States and help transform their approach towards development by ensuring inclusive, people-centered and sustainable development with **no one left behind** (UNGA, 2018).

The field of sport offers a lucrative mix of opportunities uniquely suited to promoting broad social goals such as Universal Popularity which transcends geographical and cultural barriers, Capacity as a powerful global communications platform (FIFA World Cup had the largest viewership of 5 million people across the globe), Ability to connect and bring together people of various ethnicities and nationalities on to a

common ground and the Potential to empower, motivate and inspire leading to a mental revolution and successful awareness campaigns. And as is well known, 'Change comes from within'.

Sustainable Development is a concept that is as much a mental phenomenon as it is social or economic. It will be completely successful only when the human mind accepts and practices 'sustainability' as an intentionally chosen way of life. Therefore, amongst all the efforts aimed at its implementation, perhaps the most important are the awareness campaigns, for which Sport is by far the most superior choice owing to its ability to reach and persuade the masses. Perhaps there is no other platform that can match the field of Sport in its efficacy to convey, convince and inspire. This has been duly acknowledged by the United Nations which has been using Sport since its inception as platform to perpetrate its various global policies. In 2001, it set up a special office for Sport for Development and Peace, exclusively to use the many advantages beyond holding of mere competitions. This office contributed considerably towards the Millennium Development Goals, the success of which led the UN to establish a direct connection with the International Olympic Committee in 2017 through the Department of Economic and Social Affairs. A resolution was passed at the 73rd General Assembly declaring **Sport as an important enabler of Sustainable Development Goals, especially with respect to the 2030 Agenda**, in December 2018 -

"Sport is also an important enabler of sustainable development. We recognize 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." (UNGA, 2018)

How can Development be Sustainable?

The concept of intentional and planned Development gained prominence in the post World War II, but gained momentum during globalization era. Towards the turn of the twentieth century, a parallel critique emerged and the hitherto accepted concept of development began to be questioned and examined with the rise in "ecological" consciousness and concern that natural resources are finite (Somayaji, 2015).

For the first time in history, most of the nation-states irrespective of their economic status recognized the need for some collective action to preserve resources and this led to the compiling of 'Our Common Future', familiar as 'The Brundtland Report', by the United Nations in 1987.

If we look a bit further back, there were precursors to this report, the most prominent of which was the document published by the Club of Rome titled 'Limits to Growth', which red-flagged demographic pressure, economic growth leading to industrialization and environmental pollution.

Sustainable development addresses the need to plan for inter-generational equality and counters the increased human greed and subsequent over-exploitation resulting in inequalities between generations.

Thus, Sustainable Development is not a fixed state of harmony, rather it is a process of change in which exploitation of resources, directing of investments, orientation of technological development and institutional change are consistent with future and present needs.

3.2 Role of Sports in Global Society

Sport has always been a part of society's development since time immemorial and has influenced diverse aspects of human life. Right from the inception of the Ancient Olympics, Sport has been much more than a mere physical activity. It was developed as a culture as it offered higher goals, such as the challenge of achievement and acted as a reflection of the socio-political conditions.

So important was the sporting tradition to the ancient nations that they followed the tradition of '**Olympic Truce**' during these Games, where all wars and strife were put on hold and the warring nations came

Interestingly, in 1992, the International Olympic Committee renewed the Olympic Truce in Modern Olympics. The United Nations endorsed it by passing a resolution in its General assembly (UN Resolution 48/11 of 25th October 1993) along with the UN Millennium Declaration relating to World Peace and Security. These ideals have subsequently been promoted during the Olympic flame relay before every Olympics.

The International Olympic Truce Foundation and Centre were set up in 1999 by the IOC with the following goals –

- Mobilize Youth for promotion of Olympic ideals
- Use Sport to establish contact between conflicting communities
- Offer humanitarian support during wartime
- Create a window of dialogue and reconciliation

The afore-mentioned **Olympic Truce** was not just a declaration of a lofty ideal; rather it was implemented repeatedly during critical situations which threatened peace in different parts of the world.

In the 1998 Winter Olympics, when the conflict in the Persian Gulf was at its peak UN General Secretary Kofi Annan intervened to seek diplomatic resolution through IOC and urged all countries to observe Olympic Truce.

In the 2000 Summer Olympics, North Korean and South Korean delegations marched together under the same flag for the first time in history.

In the 2010 Vancouver Winter Games, a 'Make Your Peace' campaign was initiated at national, state and local levels where citizens, especially school and college students, sent boxes of sports equipments to 20 aboriginal communities. This was an attempt to integrate the marginalized into the mainstream in a constructive and peaceful manner.

In the 2012 London Summer Olympics, Lord Bates from the House of Lords walked over 3000 miles from Olympia to London to highlight the Olympic Truce ('Walk for Truce').

The official Olympic Truce Logo has the Olympic flame, a Dove and the Olympic Rings signifying the role of sport in harmonizing and developing the world during times of strife. The UN officially adopted the resolution for Olympics 2012 to be "to build a peaceful and better world through sport and Olympic ideal."

The gravitas with which the Olympic truce was incepted was given a more concrete shape by the United Nations in 2001 with the establishing of **UN Office on 'Sport for Development and Peace' (UNOSDP)** introduced by the General Secretary, Kofi Annan, with its headquarters in Geneva and a liaison office in New York. The objective of the SDP was declared to be "promotion of Sport in a systematic and coherent manner to achieve development and peace".

Sport for Development and Peace programme – Inception, Implementation and Impact (2001-2017)

The UNO-SDP was established to assist the Special Adviser on Sport for Development and Peace to the UN Secretary-General. Thus, UNO-SDP's role was to generate awareness about sport and physical activity as tools in the advancement of peace and development especially the UN's Sustainable Development Goals.

Guilianotti (2010) divides the Sport for Development and Peace initiative into two parts in order to study the manner of its implementation more closely. SDP was introduced with a broad objective of using sport for developmental and peace activities across the globe, yet, in its initial phase it used short-term projects which were often localized within a smaller geographical context. The other diametrically opposite to this, were the high-level international sporting events which although got high media coverage but lost steam once the event got over.

The second phase of SDP has witnessed more coherence and co-ordination, a well-formulated framework channeling different policies suitable for diverse geographical areas or socio-cultural demographics. The objectives have become more specific and defined with concrete timelines for projects undertaken which range from peace-building to monitoring project progress to aligning with sustainability targets and to greater networking at local, national, international and transnational levels. Off-shoots of the SDP act as knowledge-transfer agencies such as Sport and Development platform in Suisse, Right to Play in Toronto and others (Giulianotti, 2011).

In 2017, in order to further streamline the working of the Sport for Development sector, the UN Office of SDP was closed and a direct partnership was established in order to get direct access to IOC's expertise and its 206 National Olympic Committees along with the International Sports Federations. The UN announced that this will strengthen the position of sport more effectively and help realize its role as 'an important enabler of sustainable development'.

Role of Sport in achieving 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

To obtain a basic understanding of the potential of Sport towards SDGs, it is first important to have a closer look at how it contributed to the Millennium Development Goals. As the SDGs have their inception in the MDGs, the contribution of sport can also be further structured to adapt to the sustainability agenda. The table below gives a well-framed input of the various manners in which sport and development sector, especially through the Sport for Development and Peace movement, contributed to the MDGs.

TABLE 1 CONTRIBUTION OF SPORT TO THE MILLENIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS

MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOAL	CONTRIBUTION OF SPORT
<p>1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants, volunteers and coaches acquire transferable life skills which increase their employability • Vulnerable individuals are connected to community services and supports through sport-based outreach programs • Sport programs and sport equipment production provide jobs and skills development • Sport can help prevent diseases that impede people from working and impose health care costs on individuals and communities • Sport can help reduce stigma and increase self-esteem, self confidence and social skills, leading to increased employability
<p>2. Achieve universal primary education</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School sport programs motivate children to enroll in and attend school and can help improve academic achievement • Sport-based community education programs provide alternative education opportunities for children who cannot attend school • Sport can help erode stigma preventing children with disabilities from attending school
<p>3. Promote gender equality and empower women</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sport helps improve female physical and mental health and offers opportunities for social interaction and friendship • Sport participation leads to increased self-esteem, self-confidence, and enhanced sense of control over one's body • Girls and women access leadership opportunities and experience • Sport can cause positive shifts in gender norms that afford girls and women greater safety and
<p>4. Reduce child mortality</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sport can be used to educate and deliver health information to young mothers, resulting in healthier children • Increased physical fitness improves children's resistance to some diseases • Sport can help reduce the rate of higher-risk adolescent pregnancies • Sport-based vaccination and prevention campaigns help reduce child deaths and disability from measles, malaria and polio • Inclusive sport programs help lower the likelihood of infanticide by promoting greater acceptance of children with disabilities
<p>5. Improve maternal health</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sport for health programs offer girls and women greater access to reproductive health information and services • Increased fitness levels help speed post-natal recovery
<p>6. Combat HIV and AIDS, malaria, and other diseases</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sport programs can be used to reduce stigma and increase social and economic integration of people living with HIV and AIDS • Sport programs are associated with lower rates of health risk behavior that contributes to HIV infection • Programs providing HIV prevention education and empowerment can further reduce HIV infection rates • Sport can be used to increase measles, polio and other vaccination rates • Involvement of celebrity athletes and use of mass sport events can increase reach and impact of malaria, tuberculosis and other education and prevention campaigns

7. Ensure environmental sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sport-based public education campaigns can raise awareness of importance of environmental protection and sustainability• Sport-based social mobilization initiatives can enhance participation in community action to improve local environment
8. Develop a global partnership for development	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Sport for Development and Peace efforts catalyze global partnerships and increase networking among governments, donors, NGOs and sport organizations worldwide

Source: *Harnessing The Power of Sport for Development and Peace: Recommendations to Governments*, ©Right To Play on behalf of the Sport for Development and Peace Working Group, Toronto: 2008.

UN Vision for using Sport to achieve SDGs

As per the UNEP, the current world population is the most literate in history, but is ironically depicting irresponsible behaviour towards their natural environment. ‘Sustainable’ education is the binding factor between the SDGs, especially in the context of the rapid urbanisation of the world.

Sport has a clear link with some of the SDGs, such as “Good Health” (SDG 3), “Quality Education” (SDG 4), “Gender Equality” (SDG 5), “Reduced Inequalities” (SDG 10), “Sustainable Cities and Communities” (SDG 11) and “Responsible Consumption” (SDG 12), but it can easily be used as a medium to contribute to all SDGs.

The International Olympic Committee (IOC) which led the movement for Sports for achieving the MDGs has initiated the IOC Sustainability Strategy under which 11 SDGs have been identified as pertinent to the Olympic Movement. Sport for Sustainable Development programmes integrate sport with other non-sport components to enhance their effectiveness across local, regional, national and transnational sustainability initiatives so that they are mutually reinforcing. These programs do not only impact the target groups but also empower the participants at every step in the delivery chain of sustainable activities and pursuing sustainability through collaboration, partnerships and coordinated action (Levinsen, 2004).

Future of Sport and SDGs post-SDP as envisioned by UN

The Secretary General presented a report in the 73rd Session of the UN General Assembly prepared by its Division for Inclusive Social Development of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA). DESA serves as the current nodal agency of the Sport for SDGs initiative.

To further solidify its commitment to this cause, UN passed a resolution in its General Assembly declaring **Sport as an important enabler of Sustainable Development Goals, especially with respect to the 2030 Agenda**, in December 2018 -

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To emphasize upon the continuation of the Sports for Development agenda, the UN General Assembly has requested the Secretary General to provide an updated plan of action on contribution of sport to the Sustainable Development Agenda which specifically included:-

- 1) specific initiatives aimed at ensuring more effective implementation of the Olympic Truce;
- 2) contain progress made by Member States and the United Nations system, towards the implementation of the United Nations Action Plan on Sport for Development and Peace;
- 3) provide a review of the contribution of sport to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda; and
- 4) present an updated Action Plan on Sport for Development and Peace.

This would help the stakeholders in the field of sports and development develop their future course of action and undertake concrete initiatives and design well-structured policies in alignment with the various sustainable development initiatives and agendas. It also aimed to serve as a framework of reference for governments, civil society and corporate world to identify the best ways in which sport can deliver for the achievement of the SDGs (UN-DESA, Strengthening the Global Framework for Leveraging Sport for Development and Peace, 2018).

Kazan Action Plan – 2017: A Foundation of the Global Framework for Leveraging Sport for Development and Peace

The Expert Group Meeting & Interagency Dialogue organized by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) in June 2018 for Strengthening the Global Framework for Leveraging Sport for Development and Peace summarized that,

“As a tool for aligning international and national policy in the fields of physical education, physical activity and sport with the United Nations 2030 Agenda, the Kazan Action Plan addresses the needs and objectives identified in the UN Action Plan on SDP. An integration of both these plans into a common framework is indispensable, in order to ensure enhanced coherence and synergies within the UN system, as well as a more effective mobilization of Member States and partners.” (UN-DESA, Kazan Action Plan Report, 2018)

Methodology

The present paper is a desk-based evaluative analysis conducted after an extensive review of literature was done to collect information and get a fair understanding previously conducted research on similar issues, and analyzed in order to understand the different aspects of the research area and its preclusion. Interviews of key informants and oral narratives of sportspersons, officials and experts were analysed. Qualitative content analysis of government and inter-government documents was conducted.

Conclusion

Sport has often been described as “a continuous social experiment as it performs multiple functions – developmental, educational, communicative and patriotic, thus integrating and coordinating individuals, groups and even nations” (UK-E, 2016). Sport is one common binding factor for humanity. It has a number of advantages that makes it an essential component for the achievement of any universal goal, more so for the Sustainable Development Goals.

The Implementation of the 2030 Agenda now requires an even more coherent and integrated approach at the local, national and transnational levels. The policies that need to be formulated will have to focus on identifying inter-linkages within the social sector as well as between the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. Similarly, existing institutions or institutional mechanisms that are working in the field of social development will have to adapt or expand the scope so as to accommodate the new mandates arising from the SDGs.

Out of the various sectors, Sport has emerged as a field having the required qualities of being a dimension that cuts across sectors and can be used to address a broad range of social and economic challenges. Sport has always been much more than simply a field with the sole purpose of earning medals or providing physical activity. It is a sector that has never operated in isolation, rather has served as a platform where many policies have been jumpstarted and some have gotten the much required push in the form of generating awareness and contributing towards society positively (SDP, 2001).

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