

## **Sport as youth violence prevention**

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### **Abstract:**

This article addresses the potential sporting and leisure activities have for the prevention of youth violence in urban settings. A side effect of the accelerated global urbanization process is the increase of young people living in cities, especially in marginalized and poor areas. They are often excluded socially and economically and are deprived of facilities that allow them a positive use of their leisure time. Planned initiatives involving sport, leisure, and cultural activities can empower those excluded youth, equip them with relevant social skills and offer an alternative to violent or criminal behaviour. The article is by no means meant to be exhaustive but its aim is to give a short overview illustrated by examples of intervention measures in Brazil, Sudan and the USA.

### **1. Introduction**

The subject of “sport and violence” encompasses a wide range of concerns and issues. These range from violent incidents during sporting activities, such as fights among fans of different football teams, to the use of sport as tool for violence prevention, especially among urban youths. It must be, therefore, differentiated between “violence prevention in sporting activities” and “violence prevention through sporting activities”. However, only a few aspects of these concerns and issues can be addressed within this article, which clearly focuses on the positive aspects of sport and physical activities in organized and spontaneous expressions.<sup>1</sup>

The words of Kofi Annan, former Secretary-General of the United Nations, illustrate clearly this positive aspect of physical activities: “Sport can play a role in

improving the lives of individuals, not only individuals, I might add, but whole communities. I am convinced that the time is right to build on that understanding, to encourage governments, development agencies and communities to think how sport can be included more systematically in the plans to help children, particularly those living in the midst of poverty, disease and conflict.” ([www.un.org/themes/sport/index.htm](http://www.un.org/themes/sport/index.htm) )

## **2. Urban development and youth in an urban environment**

According to latest statistics on urban development, 2007 represented a major turning point, when, for the first time in history, urban population exceeded that living in rural areas (UN-Habitat.2006) Rapid urban growth led to the proliferation of informal settlements predominantly in developing countries with nowadays living some 1 billion slum dwellers in extremely difficult conditions. In addition, world’s population has become younger, with children and youth comprising the majority of those urban populations, but even more so among slum dwellers. Worldwide, people want their children to grow up safely and healthy, with access to education and jobs. But often cities are growing too fast for local authorities to provide basic services for their citizens and young people grow up without any social, economic or educational stability.

In addition, there can be observed a loss of traditional socializing networks and informal controls in many urban areas. Families are weakened by poverty, disease, and high crime and violence rates. The lack of schools, problems of school drop out and pressures on local neighbourhoods all contribute to weaken community networks and social capital, and threaten the traditional social controls in neighbourhoods and cities. Among youth at risk a deficiency of anchoring values can be observed, a situation that goes hand in hand with a general social exclusion. According to a definition used by

UNESCO “social exclusion” refers to the absence or insufficiency to incorporate part of the population into the social and political community, in a form that denies, formally or informally, the rights of citizenship such as judicial equality and access to social opportunities. It is important to underline that social exclusion goes beyond the simple economic inequality. (ABRAMOVAY et al., 1999: 18)

Consequently, young people are becoming more and more vulnerable to exploitation and to involvement in all kinds of criminal offending. Even if urban violence is by far no recent problem, its proportions are growing worldwide. Unemployment, exclusion and vulnerability contribute to the increase of behavioural patterns that include high levels of violence and delinquency. But poverty and violence can't be related automatically since many poor countries don't show elevated violence and crime rates. Still, insecurity and poor living and social conditions are often related to the phenomenon of violent behaviour (UNESCO, 2004). A simplistic view must by all means be avoided. Instead, it can be mentioned that the creation of expectations without any corresponding financial and material baseline to respond to them applies in most of the cases, especially when youth is exposed to media and its stimulation to consumption.

### **3. The role of sport in violence prevention**

Social development initiatives that target youth at risk and prevent youth from reoffending focus on a series of intervention strategies among whom two are of major importance for this article, namely sportive activities under the lead of any organization or club and spontaneous activities depending on the free access to and the availability of adequate public spaces.

The significance of sport and active leisure for the prevention of violence is well documented and ranges from the possibility to reduce the potential of aggressions in a coordinated way, to the positive use of existing sportive behaviour among youths and the acceptance of rules. The praxis of already familiar sportive activities can assist in reducing the feeling of fear and helps to improve the relationship among youth and towards their surrounding environment. In order for envisaged activities to work out properly some criteria must be taken into consideration. Activities must be developed according to youth needs and should require a low level of previous knowledge to avoid frustration or shameful situations; the use of youth culture aspects, such as HipHop music, adding to the sporting activities further stimulates the participation and feeling of affiliation among youth. Additionally, it is important to offer activities with a high flexibility regarding location, time and context to reach all segments of youth in a particular surrounding. (Institut für Friedenspädagogik)

As recent studies show, young male are the main victims and perpetrators when it comes to urban violence.<sup>2</sup> A significant proportion of the crimes that occur in cities across the world are committed by young males. Often, due to few alternative options available. Local situational factors related to masculine identity, achievement of status, prestige and social-economic empowerment are additional crucial elements to be taken into consideration when analysing this specific urban group. Strategies developed to show young people, girls and boys, the relevance and availability of better alternatives than crime and to encourage them to experience employment opportunities or engage in sporting or cultural activities instead of a life of crime are increasingly becoming popular. (UN-Habitat 2007) In the short term, engaging in sporting activities can prevent young people from committing criminal activities. In the long term, sporting,

cultural and youth employment strategies offer the possibility that the individual who benefits from them will contribute more fully and effectively towards the development of his/her community and society.

One of the foremost challenges in this context is the extent to which young people see criminals as role models and therefore seek to imitate them. Thus investing in alternative activities such as sporting and cultural activities is essential in order to offer young people a vision of what life as a member of the community can be like. This vision must be able to compete successfully with what other visions can offer to them. The role of successful sportsmen and women can serve as idol instead and might even be integrated into the activities, for example through sporadic visits or as sponsors.

At last, the potential that lies in the youth themselves must be recognized. Their active participation in the development of appropriate responses and solutions is a prerequisite for successful interventions.

But when talking about sport as violence prevention the phenomenon of violence among youth while undertaking sport activities can't be neglected. Even though this article focuses on the positive aspects of sport, the negative violent experience that can be observed in youth sport must be at least briefly mentioned. It is therefore important to keep a balance in promoting sports, for example at school, in order to avoid the stimulation of excessive competitiveness, which might even lead to exclusion. But where does this violence practicing sport come from? For some of the young people sport is no vehicle to be accepted among peers but a means to be superior to the other. It is superiority they don't experience in other environments, such as the school or at home, and which they desperately need to feel respected. In addition, sport has its own potential for aggression in form of marginalizing less agile children, frustration after

defeats, fouls, anxiety to win, and the shame of the defeated. It is therefore outmost important to include mechanisms that pass concepts of fairness and the art of losing. Therefore, the positive impacts sporting activities can have on youngsters can only reach their full development impact if the beneficiaries are taught about leisure time and how to productively use it.

#### **4. Physical activities in urban public space**

A clear tendency to see youth as difficult and problematic, not as constructive citizens, can be observed in developing and developed countries. In general, youth tend to be excluded from participation in decision-making affecting them in cities and urban areas. Such exclusion can be evident in the banning of street children and youth from public spaces and restrictions on access to a variety of opportunities. Public spaces play an important role for socialization among citizens, leisure activities and the overall quality of life. In absence of adequate private spaces and semi-private spaces youth, particularly in marginalized urban areas, depend especially on the social dimensions of available public spaces allowing them to meet and spend their free time. In order to not stimulate conflicts among other groups using and depending on the same place, such as young mothers or the elderly, a correct and participative urban planning and city management is necessary. Instead, an inadequate urban planning and exclusion of certain groups encourage crime and violence.

Using sport as a means to prevent violence public spaces might be redesigned to offer leisure facilities addressing special interests of youngsters. Positive interventions will include soccer fields, basketball hoops, fitness equipment and similar. Nevertheless, it must be underlined that the simple offer of those facilities won't have any significant impact if not accompanied by additional social, educational and cultural

activities that include the broader community and create a sense of appropriation and ownership of the public space.

### **5. Good practices: examples of successful interventions**

Naturally, specific contexts of youth violence differ a lot and responsive initiatives must respect this diversity and apply to each specific reality. The following will highlight three successful experiences using sport as a means to prevent violence and crime.

#### Opening Spaces:

The initiative *Abrindo Espaços: Educação e Cultura para a Paz* (Opening Spaces: Education and Culture for Peace) has been launched by UNESCO Brazil in 2002 and aims at transforming schools into open spaces for cultural, recreation and sportive activities. Schools in vulnerable areas open during the weekends to offer an alternative place for leisure activities that attract youth and their families in order to reduce violence and construct spaces to execute citizenship through socio-cultural and sportive activities. The programme is a direct response to the outcome of previous studies conducted by UNESCO on youth crime rates and the situation of youth in Brazil that point out a lack of alternative recreation facilities and options and increased incidents of youth violence during the weekends. (NOLETO. 2003)

#### Midnight Games:

Practicing sport at atypical times, such as around midnight, is an initiative that exists in a variety of countries and mainly in form of football or basketball matches but is not restricted to them. Midnight games have their origins in the USA and offer an

excellent example of how sport can be used to prevent violence among youngsters. Normally, games take place between 10pm and 2am and are organized with the aim of preventing youths from turning to violence, drugs and criminal behaviour. In addition to the physical activity of the games, discussion rounds analyse themes that are of importance to the youth and their lives, such as job opportunities and interviews, non violent conflict resolution, and educational issues. (Dadalos 2008a)

### Twic-Olympics in Sudan

In the Sudanese war driven Twic region, made up of six districts, communities come together to celebrate the Twic-Olympic Games under the motto *Sport for peace and development – a win-win for every child*. The idea is to turn the conflict into a fair sport event in order to allow young people of the districts to express their competitiveness through sporting activities instead of becoming part of the war fractions. The games include sports such as football, volleyball and track and field with an added value of cultural activities in form of songs and dancing. A further asset is the gender aspect of the project. The participation of girls and women is especially stimulated through a mechanism that allows communities with a high number of female athletes extra points. The event creates mutual respect and establishes social contacts among the participants contributing therefore to reducing violent conflicts in participating communities. (Dadalos 2008b)

## **6. Conclusion**

By offering a combination of sports, education, work and leadership skills training many of the initiatives targeting youth at risk seek to address youth in ways that redirect their energy and interests into activities other than crime and delinquency and



develop strategies for reducing vulnerability and empowering youth at risk. Sport contributes to the social and economic development of youth, improves their health and stimulates the personal growth and self esteem. In addition, the power of sport to help build a culture of peace and tolerance by bringing youth together in mutual respect is an important observation.

It is obvious that, for example, organized boxing doesn't address deeper reasons for violent behaviour in youth but it offers a possibility to live feelings and get rid of (negative) energies in an organized and harmful way that, at the end, can be the entry point for verbal conflict resolution. In special risk areas sporting interventions must always be accompanied by additional social interventions and a broader development of policies to reduce youth vulnerability and risk factors of becoming marginalized and excluded. Youth must be empowered and recognized as an important force for change, instead of a growing problem, and sport can be part of this process.

## Notes

- 1 The article repeatedly mentions the situation of male youngsters but intends to be gender neutral in presenting general thoughts and specific examples of sport as a tool for violence prevention without addressing the special needs of girls and boys, young women and young men in separate ways. This would go beyond the scope of this article.
- 2 According to PAHO statistics (PAHO 2008, statistics available on different years) the quantity of youth deaths in Latin America, for example, is dominated by external causes, e.g. homicides, accidents and suicides, holding responsible for up to three-quarters of the analyzed causes of death. The subject of homicide,

in particular, affects countries such as Colombia, Brazil, and El Salvador, with 139,1; 58,7 and 79,3 respectively, estimated mortality rate from homicides per 100.000 male and 13,7; 5,0 and 8,6 for female. In addition, the World Youth Report 2005, published by DESA, the Department of Economic and Social Affairs of the UN Secretariat, states that “young people constitute the most criminally active segment of the population”, but they are also the main victims of violence perpetrated in cities. (DESA 2008)

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