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LIFESTYLE

## How Sports can be used for peace and development

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Javaid Sofi in Poverty of Ambition, Lifestyle, Sports, TOI

### Javaid Sofi

Javaid Iqbal is a global fellow at Brandeis University. He is a former management consultant who has worked in a diverse group of industries—ranging from social entrepreneurship to innovative financial modelling to sustainable development. To understand both sides of the proverbial financial coin, he worked in India within the private sector as a financial consultant as well as in public sector administration. With an MBA in financial management, he worked for a few corporations but soon realized that helping rich people get richer was not his calling. In his spare time, he enjoys watching and playing football, reading creative non-fiction, and recently, writing on socio-political issues to translate international development jargon and updates for public consumption.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development recognizes sports as a vital enabler of sustainable development and recognizes the growing contribution of sports for development and peace. Sport is a compelling tool to promote peace, tolerance, and understanding, bringing people together across boundaries, cultures, and religions. Its values such as teamwork, fairness, discipline, and respect are understood all over the world and can be utilized in the advancement of solidarity and social cohesion.

Sport is not limited to the practice of physical activities. It is in fact, a recreational space where a healthy lifestyle is promoted, through physical and mental development. It is a place where individuals converge to improve their social skills, strengthen cultural values and adapt to rules. Physical activities improve individual health and wellbeing, both physically and mentally, and teach important values and social skills. But sport doesn't just empower on an individual basis; it also unites and inspires people collectively, which builds communities.

Sustainable development not only needs political governance but also needs to find spaces and platforms that bring people together under a common goal. The massive

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appeal of sport makes it a social phenomenon, where the context in which it's developed determines the behaviours and actions of its followers, especially when it involves youth. Values such as fairness and respect can serve as examples for an economic system that builds on fair competition and supports an equal sharing of resources.

Sports have long been idealized to heal wounds, mend fences, and rise above differences among cultures and nations. *Invictus*, a fictionalized but largely accurate account of how, after being elected South Africa's first post-Apartheid president, Nelson Mandela shrewdly turned to the Rugby World Cup to help foster the country's healing process and prevent a civil war that many feared was inevitable. On the global scene, world leaders have used sports as a means to promote peace and unity, such as the 1971 Chinese-American reconciliation through ping-pong that ended two decades of unfriendly relations between the two superpowers, while in 2008 the presidents of Armenia and Turkey used a World Cup qualifying match between their national teams to reopen diplomatic dialogue. A study on the case of football in Liberia shows that football is considered 'a "neutral" pursuit – a common cultural property unspoiled by war'. During the civil conflict, football tournaments were considered the only occasions that produced a sense of national unity. Prime Minister Narendra Modi said India will help promote cricket in Maldives to develop the sports in the country to consolidate people to people relations.

Regardless of age, gender or ethnicity, sport is enjoyed by all; its reach is unrivaled. More importantly, though, sport promotes universal values that transcend language and culture. We can use it as a tool to improve the welfare of the planet and its people. Through its values, we can teach teamwork, leadership, humility, tenacity, and determination. But we also use sport to shine a light on social issues, harnessing its influence and reach to draw attention to matters that are impacting society

Sports also promote equality and serve as a platform to promote the value of diversity. Sport-based public awareness campaigns can promote awareness towards climate protection and can stimulate enhanced community response for local environment preservation. The role of sports in promoting gender equality is also critical. Sports helps girls and women build self-esteem and develop skills needed to become equal participants and leaders in their various communities. gender equality and women's

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empowerment are essential to the achievement of the SDGs. Sport-based initiatives also have the potential to equip girls and women with knowledge and skills that allow them to progress in society.

The UN office on sport for development and peace has been running a youth leadership program since 2012, intending to empower young leaders from disadvantaged communities to use sport as a tool for progress. The initiative has enjoyed some notable successes

At the grassroots or community level, sport can be seen to provide a useful way of creating an environment in which people can come together to: work towards the same goal, show respect for others and share space and equipment. Sports can play a very important role in helping achieve SDG goals of No poverty, Zero Hunger, good health and gender equality. When paired with lessons on nutrition and agriculture, sport for development programs can be a suitable complement for food programs tackling hunger and education

However, Sporting initiatives alone cannot stop or resolve conflict, but sport gives us an engaging and cost-effective medium for post-conflict relief work and peacebuilding as well as future conflict prevention. Sports have long been idealized as a way to heal wounds, mend fences, and rise above differences among cultures and nations. No other social activity brings people together in such great numbers, and with so much passion and enjoyment. Regardless of age, gender or ethnicity, sport is enjoyed by all; its reach is unrivalled. More importantly, though, sport promotes universal values that transcend language and culture.