

Peace and Healing through Sports **An Initiative for Refugee Children and Youth**

A Concept Paper

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Background

During field visits to Syrian refugee camps we observed children and youth between the ages of 10 and 18 playing football. Any patch of unused land or open space was their football field; stones or barrels served as makeshift markers for goal posts; a sand-filled plastic water bottle was a ball. Most wore worn out shoes, while some played in slippers and others were barefoot.

But play football, they did.
And the joy that the game provided was unmistakable.

The power of the game and its ability to transport them out their miserable reality and dismal living conditions was magical. Luckily we were able to document these moments on film and share them with interested parties.

From there the idea for this project was born.

This is not an original idea. And the experience we witnessed is not unique.

Play, sports and leisurely activities are a necessary and integral part in the lives of children and youth. It is a right identified in *Article 31* of the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child*.

Funding agencies¹ have also become aware that sports activities directed to children and youth in these situations need not compete with other development priorities. Rather, they can be used as a tool to address difficulties relating to trauma and to enhance the capacity to cope.

At the ground level, organizations have been harnessing the transformational power of sports and physical activities to support humanitarian and aid efforts—whether in response to individual or collective trauma; peace building and conflict resolution; psychosocial rehabilitation and social integration.²

When sports activities are carried out wisely and strategically thought out, they have the potential to play an important role in the social, psychological, mental and physical wellbeing of the individual and the community.

¹ In 2001, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) announced it would use sport to promote economic and social development and created a new position, Special Adviser to the Secretary General on Sport for Development and Peace

² In 2002, Carol Bellamy, Executive Director of UNICEF, convened the United Nations Inter-Agency Task Force on Sport for Development and Peace to discuss experiences and lessons learned and make recommendations regarding the use of sport by UN programs.

Introduction

In an enthusiastic and spontaneous response to the eagerness and of the children and the natural pleasure they took in their game, we shared our experiences and footage with interested parties.

Among those was Aspire Academy, in Doha, Qatar, a sports academy whose goal is to scout and develop Qatari athletes while providing them with education.

The idea we presented in brief was the following:

The possibility of providing these youth—of both sexes—with a chance to improve their talents and abilities through proper training, and necessary facilities to play sports—primarily football, that being a priority for Aspire—while at the same time providing health and educational opportunities.

The response from Aspire was favourable especially considering their previous involvement in similar humanitarian projects.

Several steps have been implemented so far in an attempt to gauge the favourability of the idea and cooperation of various parties:

1. An assessment visit to Zaatari refugee camp
2. With a population of 80,000 and some 4,000 interested youth
3. A number of areas adequate for use as football pitches
4. It was deemed appropriate as a pilot venue for the project
5. A second visit aimed at exploring the possibilities of implementation with camp administration
6. Meetings were also held with Jordanian authorities, UNHCR representatives, NGOs active in the camp, and coaches (both male and female) from among the refugee population

The aim of the meetings was to create a feeling of ownership among the stakeholders and establish trust and commitment to the project.

This was followed by another meeting in Doha with Aspire Academy, and it was agreed that the idea would be implemented as follows:

- Holding a two days sports festival in Zaatari camp on 8-9 October attended by representatives of Aspire, camp administration, UNHCR Jordan Office, and LAS, represented by the Special Envoy to the Secretary General for Humanitarian Affairs, and a representative of the Youth and Sports department of LAS.
- The festival aims at providing enthusiasts and players of football and other sports an experience in competitive sportsmanship and a recreational environment.
- This will allow scouts to find talented youths in football (15-20 initially)

After that, specialists from Aspire and coaches from the camp will design a development training program.

Peace and Healing through Sports **Concept and** **Preliminary Strategy**

Having made initial steps to find interested parties and establish potential partnerships, it became necessary to develop a clear concept and an initial strategy that allows for a systematic, planned and programme-driven response to the needs we have identified.

It is also important to capitalize on the enthusiastic cooperation of current partners in order to widen the partnership and increase the number of beneficiaries.

To begin with sports activities will focus on football for many reasons:

- a) Set up and equipment for the game are simple, inexpensive and well suited to the environment of the refugee camps
- b) There is a passion for the game in the region, particularly among children and youth
- c) The build up to the 2018 World Cup is already creating enthusiasm among youth in the region
- d) Capitalizing on World Cup 2018 fever will make it easier to establish partnerships and access funding
- e) Funding for athletic training can be coupled with life-skills, rehabilitation and psychosocial programmes

Overall Goals

- Integrating sports into the lives of Syrian refugee children and youth to enhance their physical, emotional, psychosocial and mental health.
- Instilling the values of sportsmanship as well as the athletic skills.
- Identifying and training appropriate adults among the refugee community to coach children and youth
- Scouting potential talents from among the children and youth to further develop their skills and nurture their talents.

Peace, Healing and Development Goals

The primary aim of this project is not to create the next football superstar, although one aspect of the project would be to identify potential talent.

In order to fulfill the peace and healing goals and to serve the development aspect there are certain issues that need to be addressed when implementing a sports initiative for traumatized youth living within a traumatized community.

1. Young people who are affected by trauma do not feel safe emotionally or physically. Therefore it is important to provide them with safe spaces where they can develop their self-confidence as well as develop trust in others.
2. Healing from trauma is a long process. Programs that seek to aid in this process must be aware of the need for a long-term, continuous investment; short-term programs can have a negative effect, re-activating the trauma when the intervention

ends. Therefore, it is important to stress that the program is not only to find talented athletes and remove them from the environment, but to enable all children and youth to benefit in varying degrees from what is being offered.

3. It is essential through the sports activities that values and moral issues be given as much weight as the skills and techniques of playing the game.
 - a. Sportsmanship
 - b. Collaboration and Cooperation
 - c. Team spirit
 - d. Patience, discipline,
 - e. Respect for others
 - f. Non-violent conflict resolution
4. It is also essential to have trained and knowledgeable coaches who are aware of the trauma and stress that these children and youth are going through, and to be given either the skills to deal with them or the appropriate referral services.
5. When recruiting coaches and teachers from the refugee community, it is just essential to be sensitive to their own trauma and the issues they may be dealing with. Therefore, training for coaches should also include psychosocial assessment and counselling.