

At Play in the Fields of Young Soldiers in Northern Uganda
By: Dean M. Ravizza, Ph.D.
Salisbury University, MD
The Use of Sport in Armed Conflict Settings
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Introduction

Peter (pseudonym) is a 16 year old boy attending a local school in Northern Uganda. He was abducted at the age of 11 from his home village by LRA rebels and was placed in command of nearly 1, 000 rebels by the age of 14. He escaped soon thereafter to the GUSCO child reception center. After several weeks there, he was reunited with his family and returned to his community. The leadership skills developed while in the bush made him a popular choice among his peers as a sport captain - a highly coveted position at his school. In addition, he learned ball repair as a trade and quickly gained steady work repairing damaged balls in his community. This has led to a seemingly successful social reintegration into his community and the development of a positive identity as evidenced by others repeated reference to him as sport captain rather than his former title of rebel.

Background

The term sport is utilized in a broad sense. Incorporated into the definition of sport are all forms of physical activity that contribute to physical fitness, mental well-being and social interaction¹. These include play, recreation, organized, casual, or competitive sport, and indigenous sports or games². The concept of “sport for all” is central to the understanding of sport. “Sport for all” initiatives, as outlined by the United Nations Task force on Sport for Development and Peace, aim to maximize access to and

participation in appropriate forms of physical activity. Emphasis is placed on participation and the inclusion of all groups in society, regardless of gender, age, or ability³.

The opportunity to participate in and enjoy sport and play is a human right that must be promoted and supported. That sport is a human right is explicitly embodied in Article 1 of the Charter of Physical Education and Sport adopted by UNESCO in 1978. A child's right to play is enshrined in Article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which recognizes "the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreation activities appropriate to the age of the child."⁴ The fact that access to and participation in sport and play is a human right creates the responsibility to ensure that these rights are upheld. It places a duty to stakeholders to ensure that the opportunity for participation in sport and play exists, allowing all children to enjoy this right. In many cases, such as that in Northern Uganda, children and youth are often denied this fundamental right as a result of ongoing conflict. The Sport for Development and Peace IWG was formed to develop policies to integrate sport into national and international development goals. And, the International Council for Sport Science and Physical Education (ICSSPE) has supported recent workshops with a resulting handbook on Sport as a Psychosocial Response to Trauma and Disaster⁵. Specific to children associated with armed groups, as outlined in the Capetown Principles and Best Practices for Social Reintegration of Child Soldiers in Africa, "recreational activities should be included in all reintegration programs for war-affected children."⁶ The recently adopted Paris Principles confirms the use of sport and recreational activities during the reintegration process⁷.

Sport programs contribute to the children's psychosocial well-being, facilitate the reconciliation process and constitute part of their rights as children.

Successful implementation of sport programs is congruent with child protection issues as outlined by Unicef and the United Nations Millennium Development goals from maintaining school attendance to promoting gender equality and reducing child mortality⁸. Sport and child protection must not be viewed as dichotomous but rather as complementary. While child protection within sport has garnered attention, sport can be used as a premise to promote issues related to child protection such as building a safe, protective environment for our children and youth even during times of conflict. One related example is the implementation of *Child Play Areas* established by WarChild Holland throughout several conflict-affected districts in Northern Uganda.

Sport and Resocialization and Reintegration of Former Combatants

Currently, there is little evidence-based research that implicitly describes the role of sport in the resocialization/reintegration process of children formerly associated with armed groups, nor its effectiveness. Field-based research revealed that child respondents believed that games (including sport) were the “best thing” about the reception center at which they were accommodated⁹. One young male stated “Football was the best thing for me because I would feel fine after playing. I always had a relaxed mind after playing.”¹⁰

This lead to the question “What role does sport play in the R/R process at reception centers?” Particularly, “Is sport utilized for this process? If so, how and why?” In order to answer these questions, semi-structured interviews were conducted with staff members at three child reception centers in two districts. Each staff member that was interviewed organized the sport component at their respective reception center. There

were commonalities and differences in aspects of implementation including venues, types of sports, and the general purpose. These included:

1. Children at two centers engaged in sport inside the confines of the center while children at another played outside of the center in an open field space adjacent to a local secondary school.
2. Each center dedicated a specific time of day to participation in sport although longer periods of time were allotted at the discretion of the supervisors.
3. The centers utilized an invitational approach to participation. Children were never forced to play but were given the opportunity to do so at their discretion.
4. Children participated in games and activities yet at each center boys engaged in football (soccer) and girls played netball due in part to its cost effectiveness.

The interview data also revealed broad-based responses to questions related to the use of sport as a premise for resocialization supported with general anecdotal evidence. For instance, the social workers were asked, “What is the purpose of engaging children in sport while at the reception center?” The interview subjects responded along the lines of socialize through a popular activity, tires them (children) out, allows them (children) to sleep better, calms them (children) down, and keeps the mind off of the past. According to Steven (pseudonym), a field officer at one reception center, “older children come to the center and often order younger children around at first as a result of being in the bush. Once they play sport, they socialize properly.” Julia (pseudonym) stated, “they (children) come here with many fears...when they play sports, they enjoy themselves and forget about those fears.” While not supported by scientific data, these broad-based responses

provided initial insights into how sport is utilized at the reception centers and a basic premise for including sport in the resocialization and reintegration process.

Children's Interpretation of Sport

At one reception center, group discussions were held at the end of each evening sporting sessions to determine the children's interpretation of sport as means to foster successful reintegration. Out of 48 respondents, 100% reported participating in some form of sport prior to their abductions. Examples shared included football, volleyball, netball, and a variety of cultural games. The children participated in formal and informal games with during school being the highest response. By interpreting this response, sport was a significant part of the lives of the children prior to their abduction. Therefore, it can be a viable "reconnector" for children upon their return to their communities given its importance in their lives.

The same children responded in a focus group setting to a series of open-response questions during their group discussions. For example, children were

asked, "By playing sport, I can....?" The children responded along themes of developing social skills, health and well-being, and resolving conflict. For instance,

Peter (pseudonym) stated, "You can solve problems like in sport...if we have a problem when playing we fix it so we can keep playing...I can do the same thing

when I am not playing." These broad-based themes focused on several aspects of physical, emotional, and social wellness. Children articulated sport in some

cases as a means to reinforce social skills that would facilitate successful reintegration in their communities.

During follow up discussions with respondents, one thirteen-year old boy named Patrick, forced to kill members of his village, talked about his lack of sleep because of nightmares that he was experiencing. When asked about how he felt after participating in the sport component, he discussed how much better he slept at night after playing football

(soccer). He smiled as he remembered playing football with friends at his school and expressed a desire to return to play with them again. “I just want to play football with my brother and friends again.” Another former abductee, a fourteen-year old girl named Sarah, expressed her desire to continue to play netball at school. She reflected upon participating in the sport as a means to socialize with other girls. “I played netball with my friends in school... I liked this time with my friends because we could play and have fun.” This was the sole opportunity for her to participate in this sporting activity due in part to her familial responsibilities before and after school. They interpreted sport, on a simple and immediate level, as a means to return to a life experienced prior to abduction and successfully reintegrate into their communities.

Children at the center discovered sport as a premise for dialogue and role playing (social worker and I gave the children a simulated conflict for the students to resolve) in the daily time labeled as group therapy. It was at this point that children made meaningful connections between their past, current, and future situations, and how they would respond in situations critical to their reintegration. Throughout the reintegration process, former child soldiers face a multitude of conflicts, making nonviolent conflict resolution a high priority in psychosocial support programs. Sports can teach children skills for handling conflict nonviolently¹¹. With appropriate guidance from staff and coaches, children learn to handle the conflicts through dialogue rather than fighting.

Sport after the Reception Centers

Recent survey research revealed that less than 50% of formerly abducted children pass through reception¹². And, given that children formerly associated with armed groups should spend as little amount of time in reception centers as possible , a focus on

community-based programs is necessary to reinforce concepts explored at the reception centers and to introduce (or reintroduce) children to similar concepts within their communities. Field-based research that followed up on former combatants in Liberia revealed that the returnees most often engaged in sport within their communities upon their return¹³. A majority of the respondents, approximately 80%, were members of a football team¹⁴. However, there was no clear delineation between gender and participation rates. Sport served as a useful premise for improving life skills of youth, social mobilization, and positive social interaction in former conflict areas¹⁵. Through the engagement of soccer activities and dancing, youth were able to apply and enhance important skills such as cooperation, communication, and nonviolent conflict management¹⁶.

Schools are ideal settings to engage our children in sport because of the ability to reach large numbers and promote gender equity. In a report to the Katakwi District office of Gender Affairs in 2005 on behalf of the Right To Play/UNICEF Uganda IDP camp program, field visits revealed, through the reports of female participants in a sport for development and peace program, a number of the girls were beaten because of participation in an extended day program that utilized sport as a means for social integration and education¹⁷. It was looked upon by their families as frivolous and disruptive to the completion of familial roles such as fetching water, cooking, and cleaning. Upon negotiations with school officials, the program was applied during school hours to remain sensitive to the cultural norms. These programs can assist children in developing a positive identity, strengthening coping mechanisms, enhancing their present sense of agency, and ultimately social reintegration.

Conclusions

In order for stakeholders to understand the exact role sport plays in development and peace, we need to move beyond our intuitive thinking that “sport works,” and support this paradigm of practice-based inquiry by providing solid evidence through both quantitative analysis and qualitative inquiry in order to support our claims and to confidently state, for instance in this case, that sport does indeed play a role in the resocialization and reintegration process of children formerly associated with armed groups.

While there are many positive examples of the use of sport in armed conflict settings, it is clear there are many challenges. By no means can participation in sport address each of the individual needs of our children. For children who lost years of schooling, it can not substitute for their education. But, it can improve the quality of education by developing the whole child. For the girls who were raped and gave birth while abducted, sport cannot feed their child nor secure their cultural role in society. But, it can help girls gain respect for themselves and develop a stronger sense of self. Children, as a result of their association with armed groups, return with injuries that may result in permanent disability. They are at great risk for facing marginalization and isolation from community members. Their inclusion in sport activities with modifications is integral to their social reintegration and psychosocial well-being. Sport serves as a meaningful way to stimulate conversation and provide a context in which to learn and transfer values and address various psychosocial needs.

As I began, I would like to conclude with a story. On my first day with at a child reception center, one local schoolboy, knowing the group of former abductees were

engaged in a soccer match, walked through the middle of our game with the intent to disrupt play. When I asked this youth to kindly move – thinking only of his safety – he turned to me and asked “mzungu (white man), why do you waste your time with these rebels?” He proceeded to cross the field and disappear into the crowd of youth leaving the nearby school. This example of community stigmatization is one of the many challenges former abductees face upon their return. Their response in such situations will determine their future contributions to building a peaceful community. Successful reintegration means, according to Sarah Michael, social developmental specialist at the World Bank, going to a village and asking “who are the ex-combatants here?” And hearing the reply: “we had some, but I can’t remember who they are anymore.”¹⁸ Successful reintegration may also mean the same boy’s return to the playing area two weeks later and asking “mzungu, can I play?”

References

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