

IN DEPTH

Can Sport For Peace Strengthen Social Cohesion in Refugee Host Communities?

Mark Clark

Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Generations For Peace

Generations For Peace (GFP) was founded in 2007 as a pilot initiative of the Jordan Olympic Committee to use sport for peacebuilding. Over time we have expanded our activities to include the arts, advocacy, dialogue and empowerment, but sport-based activities remain the most popular and are often the first entry point for our volunteers to engage with their community members. GFP focuses on grassroots sport activities in communities to address local issues of conflict and violence. Think of weekly activities in a village or neighbourhood setting, rather than mega tournaments in a stadium!

In Jordan, we have two flagship GFP programmes: one focusing on social cohesion and one on the reduction of violence and the potential for violence in schools¹ and in the host communities². Schools and communities are experiencing increased population pressures and tensions due to the intake of refugees, so our volunteers – trained teachers and community workers – are engaging with both Syrian and Jordanian youth, and adults, through sport and the arts for weekly peacebuilding activities. Both programmes target communities that are bearing the heaviest burden of Syrian refugees. More than 1.4 million Syrians reside in Jordan; more than 637,000 are officially registered with UNHCR as refugees, but 81% are living in host communities alongside Jordanians rather than in refugee camps.

As a result of the enormous pressures of the large influx of Syrian refugees on all services in Jordan – education, accommodation, water, food, employment and health care – there are natural tensions arising between Jordanians and Syrians in the host communities. Volunteers trained by GFP have been running local Sport For Peace

programmes in their schools and community centres for Jordanian and Syrian children, and youth, to strengthen resilience and social cohesion, and to reduce tensions and violence amongst and between them. Rather than traditional sport activities, the GFP approach focuses on tailored sport-based activities, games and exercises which integrate peer group peacebuilding education, because our objectives are peacebuilding outcomes rather than the development of sporting skills and competitive excellence. So instead of being sport coaches, our volunteers play the role of facilitators, carefully constructing a “safe space” to ensure participation and learning for all, thereby achieving the desired peacebuilding outcomes. The activities are carefully adapted to the local context and culture, the local priorities and the group of participants.

“ Sport activities may help restore self-esteem and rehabilitate those who have been vulnerable to trauma and violence – whether as victims or perpetrators ”

Different Sport For Peace programmes may focus on various types of conflict. Sport activities may help restore self-esteem and rehabilitate those who have been vulnerable to trauma and violence – whether as victims or perpetrators – including those disabled or marginalised by violence. Team sport games can help build new relationships of trust and acceptance, breaking stereotypes and bridging conflict divides. Sport activities can promote greater inclusiveness of those facing discrimination or exclusion in the community, including ethnic minorities, displaced people, refugees and people with a disability. In addition, sport activities can foster changes in cultural norms over time, finding common ground between different groups and enabling communities to embrace diversity, and fostering greater equality of opportunities for women and men, and for the marginalised and excluded.

Sport is a powerful tool for reaching vulnerable youth and reducing violence in conflict settings. With a good understanding of the local community it should always be

possible to identify a popular sport that can serve as a great entry point to engage youth. Moreover, sport is universal, so when people play sport together, it does not matter whether they speak the same language or have other common interests – they can all understand the rules of the game, share the excitement and energy of play, and work together as a team to achieve their objectives. For example, a carefully facilitated sport activity can provide a controlled “neutral” space for people to meet across conflict divides³, to promote tolerance and build new relationships that may not otherwise be possible. These types of sport-related situations automatically create perfect “peer groups” – people of a similar age, sharing a passion and experience together. These groups create a powerful structure for discussion, learning, reflection and mutual support. This allows the breaking of old stereotypes and encourages individuals to embrace diversity.

Grassroots Sport For Peace programmes can support significant positive sustainable change in a community and at a relatively low cost. Most resources needed – a simple space or venue, basic sport equipment, refreshments – are cheap and can even be provided by local stakeholders as value-in-kind support. We must promote and expand these programmes, and support the volunteers across the world who are using sport as a vehicle for change in their communities. One-off events – even those involving sporting celebrities – do not lead to sustained impact. To secure lasting positive changes in attitudes and behaviour, Sport For Peace activities must attract and retain the participation of a target group in regular sessions that build progressively on each other over a sustained period. GFP programmes typically engage participants in 60 hours of activity over a period of six months. This is where real lasting impact comes from. But it means the activities must be fun, so that participants keep coming back! Short fly-in fly-out visits by elite global sport superstars are not conducive to measurable positive impact, but sport star role models at the grassroots level – think of the young female captain of a village basketball team⁴ – are very influential in their local community and available to support a sustained programme.

“ The aim of Sport For Peace programmes in schools for Jordanian and Syrian children is to strengthen resilience and social cohesion, and to reduce violence ”

Choosing the appropriate sport activities for local cultures must be well thought out. In order to communicate your message broadly and effectively, as well as having fun, programmes should take into account conflict divides, age, gender, physical abilities and sporting skill levels. Be creative and tailor sport code rules, improvise equipment and add modifications to games as you go along. In some communities, girls and women may be reluctant to participate in, or prohibited from participating in, traditional sport activities. GFP addresses this in different ways according to the specific context, such as holding boys' and girls' activities at different locations to reduce feelings of self-consciousness; ensuring girls' activities are facilitated by female volunteers; and introducing girls to sports that are new in the community to avoid male-dominated sport structures. In vulnerable communities, these approaches provide vital opportunities for girls to be leaders and improve their confidence and self-esteem.

In all Sport For Peace programmes, the competitive nature of sport should not be underestimated: it provides a powerful dynamic focused on teamwork and interdependence, which should not be removed, but must be carefully applied. Jumping straight to a sport game between two rival communities in conflict is likely to lead to a very negative outcome. The power of the competitiveness should instead be channeled into fostering interaction and teamwork between the players from both communities by forming mixed teams that must work together.

In our Jordan Schools Programme, GFP provides training and mentoring for teachers who, on a volunteer basis, run a series of ongoing sport-for-peace and arts-for-peace behaviour-change activities with their students. Our impact reports highlight the progress achieved through teachers and students responding to conflict and disputes

in non-violent ways. Reports show improved relationships between teachers and students, and between the students themselves, including Jordanian and Syrian students. This has led to improvements in academic performance and a significant reduction in violence: a decrease of 80% of female and 52% of male students who report responding to conflict with other students, teachers or at home with physical violence. A total of 1,800 female and male students (aged 12-16) are already directly benefitting as participants in this programme.

“ Sport activity can provide a controlled “neutral” space for people to meet across conflict divides, to promote tolerance and build new relationships that may not otherwise be possible ”

In our Jordan Social Cohesion Programme, GFP volunteers are supporting 5,900 Jordanians and Syrians in vulnerable host communities. Trained volunteers have been running sport-for-peace and arts-for-peace activities in youth centres for Jordanian and Syrian children, and youth, to strengthen social cohesion and reduce violence in an environment where 70% of Jordanian and 63% of Syrian males, and 30% of Jordanian and 37% of Syrian females mention physical and verbal violence in their interactions. The participants, who are equally split by gender and nationality, are also implementing small local initiatives of their own, extending the reach of the programme. To date, our reports reveal that 44.4% of female and 40% of male Syrian participants formed friendships with Jordanian participants through this programme.

As GFP programmes in Jordanian host communities move from strength to strength, we are also reminded of the broader impact of sport as an entry point for peacebuilding. In fact, our work using Sport For Peace has seen youth leading social change activities in communities in Macedonia, Lebanon, Rwanda, South Sudan, Sri Lanka and many more countries globally. Programmes based on other vehicles for change support GFP volunteers in 50 countries across the Middle East, Africa, Asia and Europe. Since 2007, we have trained nearly 9,000 volunteers, and with our support their programmes have

reached over a quarter of a million children, youth and adults.

1. Jordan Schools Programme – [video](#):

2. Jordan Social Cohesion Programme – [video](#):

3. Building Peace in Sri Lanka – [video](#):

4. Three Stories from Zimbabwe – [video](#):

Photography: Generations For Peace

© Generalitat de Catalunya