

Football as a Tool for Peacebuilding

Leszek A. Cwik

Abstract

In the unpredictable and uncertain context of local peacebuilding, football may provide a sense of normality and inter-ethnic contact, which could extend beyond broken communication lines. Often ignored and overlooked, possibly due to its simplicity and association with youth, football is a legitimate social force, which in its own way is capable of initiating reconciliation. In Africa, for example, its importance in peacebuilding is well-illustrated when one considers that young people have been the major participants in most wars on the continent, and that the population of Africa has youth as its majority. Its roots as a peace tool may be traced back to the 14th century when Edward II, the King of England, prohibited the game of football after becoming alarmed that the young men were spending more time playing it than practicing archery or other warlike activities. These days, "The Beautiful Game," is being used as a peace initiative in the ethnically divided areas of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Israel-Palestine, and the Ivory Coast.

This paper introduces football's role in ethnic reconciliation and associates it with the term "interactive conflict regulation," known as a method toward transforming conflicts based on direct, physical, psychological, and emotional contact between hostile ethnic groups. Other than bringing people together across ethnic boundaries, football can also be used to improve the lives of refugees, help reintegrate former child combatants and provide peace education in conflict zones.

Author Profile

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In several regions of protracted conflict, Israel-Palestine, Rwanda, the Ivory Coast and Cyprus, to name a few, the game of football has begun to be seen as the entry point toward reconciliation between divided communities. In Bosnia, it is already seen as a major success story, and is showing potential in other divided societies. Most recently, an example of the game's potential for inter-ethnic peacebuilding was seen on the hostile India-Bangladesh border. As a local correspondent reported, "On May, 18, 2007, in the town of Dawki, the same place where border guards have often traded gunfire across a porous frontier, Indian and Bangladeshi guards slipped out of their battle fatigues to play their first ever friendly football match in the hilly frontier town." P.K. Mishra, Border Security Force (BSF) Inspector General for the Assam-Meghalaya frontier, welcomed the foreign delegation with open arms. "This is our first friendly match, it is a great day," said Mishra. "Sports are a great way to develop cordial relations." The General also added that football had expanded the arena for inter-ethnic cooperation, as a delegation of the Indian border guards' wives is now on a tour to Bangladesh to meet the Bangladesh wives' association. "When our wives are involved, we will surely become friends," said one of the participants. The match was followed by unusual bonhomie between the families of Indian and Bangladeshi personnel. Soon, it is very likely that their children, as well as their friends' children, will play football together as well. This is very much an example of peacebuilding based on contact and relationships, as proposed in the method for solving identity conflicts, known as "interactive conflict regulation." As the two countries are trying to improve relations, the match played between hostile ethnicities, as well as the valuable involvement of their wives, exemplify some of the features of a local peacebuilding approach.¹

In the field of peacebuilding, most contemporary methods designed to end violence have not taken local initiatives seriously enough, and have focused more on abstract, top-level solutions. Over the years, it is becoming increasingly evident that such an approach isn't equipped to address the problems of conflicts which are often entangled in complicated ethnic issues, in that it does almost nothing to build trust where it is most needed - in the local community. Traditional peacebuilding techniques are guilty of not paying sufficient attention to the attitudes of the people on behalf of whom peace is supposedly being made. Thus far, the emphasis on state diplomacy and *realpolitik* has not demonstrated a capacity to control protracted social conflicts, much less lead them toward constructive, peaceful outcomes. Therefore, what is also required is a sphere in

¹ See www.bdnews24.com/smr/jr/bd/1729bdnews24.com

which relationship-building and reconciliation would be central goals. Based on this requirement, an approach which focuses on the grassroots, starting with the people, is slowly beginning to take command in peacebuilding practice. This fact shouldn't be at all surprising since many practitioners such as John Paul Lederach have been critical of the status quo in peacebuilding methodology. In particular, Lederach prefers a technique of transforming ethnic conflicts which is aimed at reconnecting broken relationships between conflicting groups, principally because, as he states, "the relationship is the basis of both the conflict and its long-term solution." This method is aimed at building social networks that cut across the conflict divide.²

This is perhaps most evident in Bosnia, where Football for Peace projects have been responsible for initiating as well as sustaining contact between ethnic identities. As part of its success story, participants who had shot at each other across a frontline just a few years earlier, now organize football activities together for their children. In the words of the founder of the Football for Peace project in Bosnia, Anders Levinsen: "I personally find that there is a greater need to facilitate tolerance projects in Bosnia-Herzegovina that are founded on positive energy rather than on the hatred, fear and national psychosis generated by the war. And in this context, what can be better than to use the best toy in the world as a tool: the ball?" Football can provide a non-political and informal forum to promote peaceful coexistence.³

As for its role in peacebuilding, football can establish a more livable and psychologically healthy relationship between former enemies, where hate and revenge do not continue to take the conflict back into violence. In light of this claim, reconciliation would therefore refer to the new relationship, based on the healing of deep emotional scars. In other words, in approaches to peacebuilding, we should not neglect "irrational issues," such as entrenched hatred and fear, in favor of well-known structural issues, such as the distribution of power or disarmament. Johan Galtung would add here that peace workers are finally beginning to realize that "peacebuilding is a process which has no end, thus ways must be found to build peace sustainably once international funding has gone."⁴ If explained in conflict resolution terminology, football would need to take on the role of a third party. "In transforming identity conflicts, third parties play a decisive role as initiators and agents of wide-ranging peace-alliances."⁵

² John Paul Lederach, *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies* (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace, 1998), p.26

³ Anders Levinsen, Patrick K. Gasser, "Breaking Post-War Ice: Open Fun Football Schools (OFFS) - A Tool for Peace in the Balkans," in *Sport and Society* (Taylor & Francis, 2004)

⁴ Johan Galtung, *After Violence: 3Rs, Reconstruction, Reconciliation, Resolution: Coping With Visible and Invisible Effects of War and Violence* (New York: Lexington, 2001). Can be accessed online at <http://www.transcend.org/TRRECBAS.HTM>

⁵ Norbert Ropers, *Peaceful Intervention: Structures, Processes, and Strategies for the Constructive Regulation of Ethno-political Conflicts* (Berlin: Berghof Foundation, 1995), p. 84

Moreover, if identities emerge and thicken by virtue of their engagement in impassioned dialogues about cultural forms and the land upon which they depend, there is a need for a dialogue which is based on continuous contact. The development of a positive relationship starts with the willingness to try and cooperate, and proceeds with the realization that a common interest is shared with “the other,” be it the love of a sport or the desire to see your village rebuilt. Peacebuilding can be taken forward with a social force like sport, which is able to connect to the emotional, psychological issues at stake. This is based on the belief that when building peace, it is important to provide the conflicting groups with the chance to have a shared experience with each other. The shared experience of sweating together to do something, whilst reflecting on what caused the hatred in the first place, can have a rewarding effect on the participants. The game's role in peacebuilding is about connecting to the hostile and polarized party. This is why it is possible to associate it with the term “nonviolent communication.” It is about the expression of your needs through your feelings, but in a contact-based, communicative style; first to express your most urgent needs, those of making a connection with the hostile party. Such a connection in itself humanizes the other side and initiates the exchange of feelings, which may then be transformed to incorporate basic needs and empathy. The feeling which results from playing a sport is really an expression of a hidden need to connect to the other side, which can easily, by virtue of its intensity, attach other feelings and needs, to be later discovered.

Football is a particularly effective way of engaging children and youth, who are considered a challenging group to interest, and are often a marginalized constituency within peacebuilding. The importance of peacebuilding projects aimed at this constituency is brought home when one considers that “young people” (up to thirty-five years) are the major participants in most wars in Africa, and over fifty percent of the population in Africa is under eighteen.⁶ These facts need to be taken seriously, since the history and sociology of sport offers a rich collection of examples of it being used in efforts to develop and express allegiances, to mobilize support for causes, to organize movements, mold identities, channel aggression and much more.

Football's Capacity for Peacebuilding

If we wish to use the world's most popular game in order to address the challenges of reconciliation, it is important to remember that football is all about forming identity. Football is an identity in itself, and identity is extremely important in peacebuilding. Identity may be defined as a person's sense of self and how he/she relates to the society they live in. It is dynamic as it is always changing, mainly as a result of its context. Football is an identity to which others may very easily connect, and it begins the important process of identity negotiation, which is key in reconciliation processes.

⁶ G Armstrong & R Giulianotti, *Entering the Field: New Perspectives in World Football* (Oxford: Berg, 1997), p.146

Since identity is an important ingredient in the escalation of conflict, it needs to be addressed in processes of conflict resolution. The formation of identity is a natural way for a group or an individual to respond to the threat of isolation and insecurity. It is generally believed that both insecurity and isolation are, to a large extent, the result of hostile feeling, aggression, and therefore, conflict, which leads to violence. They certainly are very much responsible for much of the “irrational” thinking and behavior which is caused by the uncertainty of a situation in which there isn’t any contact. Such divisions are harmful to peace as well as toward peoples’ psychological wellbeing. In Bosnia, for example, the people, leaders, trainers, and players involved in Football for Peace projects could be neighbors who do not share everyday activities due to ethnic, political or social divisions. As part of the Football for Peace project requirements, carefully selected and developed initiatives, based on geographic criteria, may bring them together across these divisions. “More often than not, football represents the only opportunity for vast, complex and impersonal entities such as towns, to unite.”⁷ The strategic guidance in the location of football projects may prove to be an excellent way to open the doors of cities that were blocked after the war.

As in Bosnia, in Israel-Palestine, the projects select the most isolated communities, as well as those which do not have organized sporting frameworks for the youth. The projects are designed to facilitate, in a sustainable way, inter-ethnic contact among the young generation. As a result of this, and in line with Galtung's view of peacebuilding as “a process which has no end,” projects are often organized into leagues which “can be run year after year, and provide a sustainable hub for mixed-identity teams to regularly meet in a safe, rule-governed and neutral setting, where people can have fun and are treated equally. When official matches are not being played, each team can continue to meet, train and have fun.”⁸

The youth in Israel-Palestine also participate in a Peace Education component, structured around a manual that has been developed specifically according to the needs of such a project. The “Peace Education Manual” focuses on issues such as conflict resolution, better listening, inclusion and exclusion, similarities and differences, and more. In addition to this, in Israel the coaches often try to cause a conflict between the children, so that they can use it as a “teachable moment” to help the children learn about resolving conflict in a positive way, whilst playing in a safe environment. In the words of Gazi Nujidat from the Israel Sports Authority, who helped to coordinate such a project: “At first, you see some distance between the children, but with time, they get close to each other. There is more understanding. And through the year we keep the activities going. One of the co-coordinators in the Jordan valley told me that one Jewish

⁷ E. Dunning, “La Dynamique du sport medicine” in N. Elias and E. Dunning, *Sport and Civilization* (Paris: Fayard, 1994)

⁸ Peter-John Baptiste, *Playing for Peace in Israel* (UEFA, March 23, 2007)
<http://www.uefa.com/magazine/news/kind=128/newsid=518415.html>

parent phoned to say they were so thankful for the opportunity of taking part in the project. They were doubtful and worried about the moment that their child would face Arab children and how they would react. And when they got the opportunity, they were so happy and told their parents how much they enjoyed playing football with Arabs. Through the project, it was so easy for them.”⁹

In Israel-Palestine as in Bosnia, one of the project's top priorities is that the participants of Football for Peace schools, in this case mostly the youth, are to be ethnically and equally mixed into teams. This is done in order to provide the group with the unifying component of football, as an identity in itself. This has been further explained by Richard D. Ashmore, the author of *Social Identity, Inter-Group Conflict and Conflict Reduction*: “If two identities are to become compatible” in order to exist peacefully with each other, “they have to be redefined, and this will happen since they are to a larger extent constructed.”¹⁰

The process of connecting to another identity would be mediated by football, as it would cut through the psychological and emotional framework which acts as a protective of each and every identity. All of this would take place subconsciously, and require a lengthy period of time, but these are the requirements of peacebuilding, since it deals with the complicated process of healing sensitive human feelings. Usually this would be done through the youth who are the greatest catalyst for change and can be expected to be the most suitable agent to connect to the other identity, first through football, then through other forms of peaceful cooperation. Increased contact and activities would surely decrease the feeling of insecurity toward the other group, which would then hopefully begin to be seen as a humanized and acceptable form of identity.

It is important to keep the Football for Peace projects from becoming simply football schools. Such projects need to continue to emphasize the selection of equal ethnicity on the basis of their significance to reconciliation. Therefore, the criteria for mixed ethnicities in each school should be strictly adhered to. There is a risk that school organizers may revert to involving only children of a “majority ethnicity,” especially in countries where the need for reconciliation is either less evident, or ignored. They may also place too much emphasis on winning, which isn't always in line with peacebuilding.

At the same time, it is important to remember that Football for Peace projects alone cannot be expected to achieve a major impact on national-level reconciliation. This is a process which will take decades, and possibly, centuries. Football can and should be expected, however, to achieve reconciliation at the local level. Top-level reconciliation requires reforms in structure and systems, most of which are well beyond the scope of

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰ Richard Ashmore, *Social Identity, Inter-Group Conflict and Conflict Reduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p.11

locally-based projects. However, in an almost ideal “football for peacebuilding” situation, the projects would take place at the local level, but the government would do something at the national level to at least set an example for youth and village sports. As the following example illustrates, football and peacebuilding at the national level, have been connected with some success in the conflict-ridden Ivory Coast.

Lessons from The Ivory Coast

The Elephants, as the national football team is known, hold the hopes and expectations of many Ivorians. The Ivory Coast's southern-based regime has fomented the existence of a separate and hated identity. The immigrants and Muslims from the north are considered to be outside of the national identity, yet many of the country's best football players are from Muslim and immigrant families.¹¹ As a result of this, the national team has become an irresistible symbol of unity and inclusion as well as the framework for a single Ivorian identity. Following the Elephants’ semi-final victory in the African Nations Cup in 2006, the head of the Ivory Coast Football Federation addressed a plea to President Laurent Gbagbo: “The players have asked me to tell you that what they most want now is for our divided country to become one again. They want this victory to act as a catalyst for peace in the Ivory Coast, to put an end to the conflict and to reunite its people. This success must bring us together.”¹² One emotionally overwhelmed fan added on national television that he “prayed players would bring the cup first to rebel-held zones and then to the government-held south.”¹³ Such comments, which had been delivered immediately after the victory, could be extremely useful in building unity, as they had been absorbed into the emotional and psychological identity of those watching.

In fact, the national players themselves realize that football can unite people, and have appealed to the politicians of their country to support the peace process. Prior to the 2006 World Cup in Germany, Didier Drogba, arguably one of the most respected players in the world, took hold of the microphone, looked straight into the camera, and asked all of his teammates to kneel down with him: “Citizens of Ivory Coast” he declared, “from the north, south, center and west, we beg you on our knees to forgive each other! Lay down your weapons, organize election, and things will be better.”¹⁴

Partly as a response to this, the country’s politicians organized a friendly match between the top two league teams, to show Ivorians that the spirit of football can unite

¹¹ Paul Laity, “Ivory Coast: The Way to Win Juju on the Field”, *National Geographic* (June 2006) Can be accessed online at <http://www7.nationalgeographic.com/ngm/0606/feature1/#ivory>

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Nico Colombant, “Ivory Coast Football Defeat Dashes Hope of Sporting Reconciliation”, *Voice of America* (February 10, 2006). Can be accessed online at www.voanews.com/english/archive/2006-02/2006-02-10-voa58.cfm

¹⁴ Ahmed Lahouari, “Football is Freedom in Forum”, *L’Express*, No. 23 (2180) (June 2007), p.59.

the country. Many of the Ivory Coast's top dignitaries, including Prime Minister Charles Konan Banny and leader of the rebel New Forces Guillaume Soro, gathered in the de facto capital of the rebel-held north, Bouake. They were there to watch the symbolic reconciliation match between league leaders ASEC Mimosas and Africa Sports. At half-time, Banny told the many thousands of spectators that football will bring the two sides together. "Everything is possible through sport," he said. "We will unite around the round ball, which," he said, "is the same for everyone. A ball rolls in the same way for everyone and because of that it is a powerful symbol for reconciliation."¹⁵ On the other hand, a member of the New Forces political front, Ben Souk, admitted the spirit of football can take Ivorians a long way. "The mentality of the players can bring peace. But not football alone, because football is a sport. We are trying to bring politics to change the mentality. That is why you see the people here. Everyone here, we are together to try to change the mentality."¹⁶

The peace overture seen in the above statements should be the beginning of a bigger plan to bring permanent peace between ethnic groups in the Ivory Coast. The path to peace should be paved not just with the one-off success at the national level, but also with long-term efforts at the local level, as is the case in Bosnia and Israel-Palestine.

It is possible to say that a balanced mixture at both the local and national level would provide football with the most effective way for peacebuilding. Sadly, in both Bosnia and Israel-Palestine where the local projects are intact, there hasn't been any success at the national level. In Israel-Palestine, this could change, as there is far more potential for football and peace to develop in that region. In particular, if Israel-Palestine were nominated to co-host the 2018 World Cup, for example, it would be a major injection toward national-level reconciliation. However, this is highly unlikely since some major structural changes would need to take place beforehand, as an event of such magnitude can take place only in the absence of violence. On the other hand, in the Ivory Coast, with its successful, colorful, and star-studded national team, there aren't any local football for peacebuilding projects which could lead to success at the national level. It is possible to say that in the near future, such a situation could exist in Iraq, as its national team is enjoying success at the top level of football, and hopefully, local peacebuilding projects will be able to build on this very soon.

Football, Parity and Structure

If football is to be utilized as a peace tool, nonviolence must be the foundation of its structure. In the makeup of the game, the core values are the same as those necessary for lasting peace, namely, *parity*, *unity* and *interdependence*, all of which are broken by violence. It is essential to implement those same values into the structure of Football for

¹⁵ Franz Wild, "Ivorian Football Players Aim to Unite Country", *Voice of America* (May.23, 2006). Can be accessed online at www.voanews.com/english/2006-05-23-voa61.cfm

¹⁶ Ibid.

Peace projects. It needs to be remembered that football's role in peacebuilding is to address the "emotional" component of the conflict. If, at the same time, a "material" goal is added to the context, such as winning, this will connect to the "structural" elements in the conflict, such as "resources or finance" for example, which may have caused the separation of the parties in the first place. Ironically, the pathway to healing may not lie with becoming more rational. In most Football for Peace projects, activities would involve those of trust-building as opposed to skill-building, as in team sports it is a requirement that you trust your team-mates, for example by "passing" to them.

Football and Violence

If football's structure isn't set toward *parity*, the game may easily be used as a violence-enhancing tool. This is largely related to its potential of being a mobilizing, unifying force. As a result of this, football has the potential to inspire in people a feeling of nationalism, which can lead to polarization, including outright ethnic violence. There are plenty of examples in the history of football that question and challenge the role of football as a peacebuilding tool. One of the most well-known examples of football triggering violence occurred during a World Cup qualifier in 1969. "The football match escalated to full-fledged war between El Salvador and the Honduras, where thousands of people were killed and over twice as many injured."¹⁷

Also, in the former Yugoslavia, the first to join military units of the emerging Croatian army were football fans, particularly the BBB and Torcida from Split, which organized their fighting mobs into political assault squads on the streets and squares of Croatian cities. What is even more shocking is that in the first phases of the war, soldiers on both sides of the conflict used the fan's symbolism, which connected them toward their identity. In turn, their identity which had been mobilized ethnically, had been connected to football, and it is possible to say, in a negative way. The first armed clashes were frequently described by those participants as a direct continuation of the clashes between Croatian and Serbian football clubs. This situation fits in very closely with the saying of the former Croatian president Franco Trujdman, from Karl von Clausewitz: "Football is merely a continuation of war by other means."¹⁸

The game's potential for violence has also been witnessed in refugee camps in Jordan. This had been the case, particularly, when the Wihdat Football Club became the symbol of the Palestine struggle, and a victory was regarded as a national and political uplift, giving pride to the Palestinian identity. Needless to say, Wihdat was considered something holy for the people in the camps. When Wihdat played, their supporters sang "ma biddna thiin wa la sardine, bidna anabil" (we do not need wheat or sardines,

¹⁷ Sverre Graff-Bjorstad, "The Football War" in Pelle Kvalsund, *Sport As a Tool for Peacebuilding and Reconciliation* (Report of the 2nd Magglingen Conference on Sport and Development, May 31, 2002), p.4 www.sportanddev.org.

¹⁸Ibid

we need bombs). “When Wihdat loses, Palestine loses!”¹⁹

In light of these examples where football has been used to divide people and intensify conflict, it is important to emphasize that the game does not in itself cause war or violence. The game may, however, trigger it. Unfortunately, it does have the ability to take the conflict from simple structure to complex psychology and emotion, mainly because it can mobilize people along the lines of identity. Similarly, football cannot cause reconciliation and peace, but if organized responsibly, as in Bosnia and Israel-Palestine, it can trigger it, and that’s enough to consider it as a peacebuilding tool.

Conclusion

To a large extent, the possibilities of football as a peacebuilder are still under-researched. The game’s potential impact and success can be defined as the longer-term changes in the overall environment of ethnically conflicted societies. Naturally, measuring impact is very difficult. This is especially true when we are dealing with the healing of intangible issues like ethnic identity, which aren’t visible and fixed, and cannot be negotiated in tangible ways. Therefore, sufficient time needs to have passed to identify such changes, if they are at all possible. Also, even if they are possible to identify, the causes of change may be unknown. They, in fact, may not at all be attributed to football, but to some other part of peacebuilding, or one at least connected with it. The long-term requirement is further complicated by the fact that peacebuilding is mainly about communication on the one hand, and justice on the other. In this case, the identity and the system both need to be addressed. At this time, it would be possible to suggest that some degree of contact between, and the normalization of life for, otherwise polarized and hostile communities would be a key measure of success. Such success has already been achieved and documented in Bosnia and Israel-Palestine at the local level. At the national level, the Ivory Coast may be regarded as an example where football has been used in terms of national or top-level reconciliation. However, its role isn't continuous and formally organized toward peacebuilding, unlike in the other two regions. Therefore, it is possible to say that in places like the Ivory Coast, where football and peacebuilding lack any local support mechanisms, such reconciliation may be short-lived, since what is required is a sphere in which relationship-building would be the key. Based on this requirement, an approach which focuses attention on the grassroots level, starting with ordinary people, is beginning to take command in the field of peacebuilding, and is most visible in Bosnia and Israel-Palestine. All in all, it is possible to say that the continuous normalization of relations among divided ethnic groups is *the* area in which football could play a significant role.

¹⁹ Dag Tuastad, “The Political Role of Football for Palestinians in Jordan” in G. Armstrong. & R. Giulianotti (Eds.), *Entering the Field: New Perspectives on World Football* (Oxford: Berg, 1997), pp.123-40.